

Secret Run

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Summary: When John Peterson, an inactive Spartan, is called to investigate a newly discovered moonsized structure orbiting behind our own moon, he and other mercs hired find answers that explain the origin of the mythic Forerunners.

Secret Run

SECRET RUN

**\*\*DISCLAIMER:\*\*** I do not, not, NOT own Spartans or any Halo references made. There, now I can't be sued. I hope.

This is my first story...be gentle with reviews, as I have a fragile psyche.

(Note: Later on, you'll come across a buncha hyphens separated from the text. This means it is transferring from the present, John's part, to/from the past Like, a few million years ago, the Forerunners' part. Um, On that note, enjoy! (please)

"\_The superior man, when resting in safety, does not forget that danger may come. When in a state of security he does not forget the possibility of ruin. When all is orderly, he does not forget that disorder may come. Thus his person is not endangered, and his States and all their clans are preserved."\_

-\*\* Confucius\*\*

"\_There will one day spring from the brain of science a machine or force so fearful in its potentialities, so absolutely terrifying, that even man, the fighter, who will dare torture and death in order to inflict torture and death, will be appalled, and so abandon war forever." \_

- \*\*Thomas A.  
Edison\*\*

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## Prologue

The single gentle ray of sun warmed him entirely, massaging his body with a warm lotion, though only hitting the very middle of his chest. The small ray was heavenly; and oddly enough to wake him up. John Peterson was an early riser, but lately had found himself sleeping in, and not finding an excuse for it. Stress? Or was he just tired? Whatever the case, he needed coffee, damn it. Slowly, he rose, the following stretch feeling better than anything else. "Good morning," he said to his favorite canine friend Red, a vicious Rottweiler. He smiled as the dog's tail sped up and then wagged furiously, creating a comically audible whishing sound. Red gave a small woof as if to reply to his master's greeting, then ran downstairs to his food bowl, John right behind him. "Yes, boy, I know!" he said with a smile as he got the dog's food.

He poured a good amount into the bowl and watched the dog inhale it. He then walked to the coffee machine and threw in the beans, as the normal morning routine began. He yawned and ground the beans then started the pot up, waiting to savor the hot liquid he would soon have. Red whined at him twice, obviously asking for more food, but the hardened Spartan merely shook his head. Red whimpered and went to the corner of the living room to sulk as John laughed. "Quit your whining," he said with a grin as the dog growled playfully in response. Their connection was remarkable; it was as if they could read each other's minds. Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, the pot dinged, signifying its completion. Its warm, smooth, satisfying completion. John reached for it and slowly poured it into his favorite mug that read 'NOT a morning person', even though he was. He just thought it was funny. He sipped, then grimaced, it being warmer than he liked. He moved to the living room and sat on the very comfortable and most expensive couch- his couch- before placing his mug on a small table at the end of the sofa. Red immediately joined him on the other side of the couch, lying down promptly. John had tried probably thousands of times before to keep the dog from doing that, but to no avail at all. He grabbed the remote and flipped to the news, just to see what's new.

On the screen appeared a too-skinny woman who introduced herself as Paula Steinman and told him about useless things. He dozed in and out of depressing news. "and also, it seems the Spartans have really been doing well!" He quickly glanced at the television, but he frowned when he remembered that it was the Spartans college football team. They were doing well, though, now the only undefeated team this season. He sipped his coffee and sighed. He hadn't been in any sort of action since the accident at Area X. He could still see the horrible, distorted face the disease had brought to his best friend and best partner William "Mortar" Simmons. He fought shedding tear as he remembered Mortar's favorite saying: "Remember! Keep your flashlights on, your safeties off, and your beer in its canister!" He could still hear Mortar's voice ringing through Area X's damp and quite musky halls. Ever since the discovery of Area X, John's commander Captain Smith had seemed really jumpy and curious about

what built the dilapidated underground tunnel system.

Abruptly John's thoughts were interrupted by his phone ringing. He walked to answer it, Red behind him. He picked it up and croaked out a "Hello?" in a groggy voice. "Peterson?" a familiar voice questioned. It was Smith. "Yes, Captain?" "Petersonâ€¦come to Delta. We've got a new mission up for grabsâ€¦one we know you'll be interested in. And if you're not, you're going' anyway." The gruff voice said. No doubt about it- it was Smith. "Sir, yes sir." John replied, saluting out of habit. There was a click and the Spartan slammed the phone onto the receiver. John looked down and scratched Red's head. "Look, I'll be back in just a little while. I'll call Ralph who'll baby-sit you if I'm gone long, O.K.?" The dog whined, but walked over to the couch to sit as John turned off the T.V. "Be back A.S.A.P., boy," he said as he grabbed his keys and left the house. Definitely no need for a coat this summer. He walked out of his driveway after waving to a neighbor, and then unlocked his car. He walked up to the work of art; a Hog. Built based on the military Warthog, it brought back good memories. He climbed into it, shut the door, and did all the stuff needed to turn on a damn car. He was shortly riding smoothly down his street. A purple car with "PiMp" on the front and sides was on the opposite side, Ralph riding quite merrily in it. Ralph smiled as he saw John stopped the car, and John yelled (with good reason, considering the new bass boost Ralph considered to be a worthwhile investment), "Hey! Take care of Red if I'm gone for a while, Ralph?" Ralph nodded. "You know I can't resist that damn dog! No problem, man." John smiled and thanked his old friend then realized he needed a way to get in. He backed up the Hog and yelled, "Catch, Ralph!" He threw a copy of his house keys, which happened to land in Ralph's lap. "I'm trusting you," the soldier yelled.

"Don't worry, John! I won't steal from ya!" Ralph laughed, and the two went their separate ways. John drove for a good 30 minutes before coming across a modernistic building with a gate in front of it. He drove to the gate and noticed Chuck was on guard duty. He and Chuck weren't really close friends, but they were slightly more than acquaintances. He waved to him and flashed his badge. Chuck grinned and waved quite stupidly. "Hey there, John. Head on in," he said happily, his twang hard not to laugh at. John thanked him and waved back, then parked his expensive car in the rather packed lot. He slipped out of the Hog and locked it. He strolled toward the entrance and noticed a muscular man standing by the door. Of course, this was but a pea compared to John, in all of his 7'2" glory. He took a closer look and realized it was Captain Smith. He waved, and Smith saw it. John jogged his way to the Captain, and greeted him with a salute. "Sir, did you want to see me?" he asked, sounding pretty dumb, which Smith responded to immediately. "Well, gee, why do you think I called you down here?!" he yelled, laughing afterwards. Smith seemed different. His normally stern expression was excited today. He was a typical superhero-type man, with super-strength and super-good-looks included. John grinned. Smith motioned for John to follow and they entered the cold, metal building. They made their way up an elevator and into a seemingly endless hallway. "Son, we've discovered somethin'. Somethin' big. Somethin' that has been there through humanity's existence, but has just been found." John cocked his head, even though the Captain never saw it, he being ahead of the Marine. "Sir?" he asked, a clear sound of puzzlement in his voice. The Captain nodded. "Yeah. Somethin' that beats the hell out of Area X."

The last statement shocked John. The entire Area X mission nearly drove Smith insane with curiosity and another mixture of things. Something bigger than Area X? That was practically an oxymoron, especially coming from Smith. "Sir, I've gotta say that sounds unlikely." Smith shrugged. "I know, John. But ya seeâ€" he stopped, John stopping almost exactly when he did (the augmentations gave him those reflexes), pointed a hand to his left, and in the air. "Right about there, in spaceâ€" is a giant construct we found a couple o' weeks ago. Sonâ€" you and a few other crazy-ass mercenaries have won an all-expenses-paid vacation there."

## Chapter 1:

It was the day. Ralph had given Red another bowl of food while the Spartan was gone, just so you know. The Spartan was on his way to Delta again, after telling Ralph to baby-sit Red well- he would be gone one helluva long time.

He slowly parked the Hog as he did a few weeks ago, then met Captain Randall Smith at the front door again. "Today's the day, Peterson," he said, a grave tone in his voice that still contained underlain anxiousness.. "We've scheduled a shuttle and everything. Do you have your MJOLNIR armor with ya? MULTIMORPH included?" John nodded and presented a black bag marked 'J.P.'. "Good. Now, we're gonna drive ya to the shuttle bay. It's gonna be one ride, Petersonâ€" but you're a tough man. You can do it." John nodded. Hearing the Captain talk like this wasn't just odd, it was sort ofâ€" unnerving. In front of the car they were getting into was a small shuttle, maybe only 40-or-so feet tall. it reminded John of a white and vertical Sphinx. With no head. The soldier thought for a while, then marveled at the thought of being in space- he had been dreaming of being an astronaut (certainly not a Spartan) since he was a child. As the small transport vehicle took them closer to the ship, he smiled in almost triumph and said in his mind, This is it, John. You've gone through hell to get here. You better enjoy this, you lucky bastard.

Smith broke the silence which shrouded nearly the entire trip. "John. Good luck. Remember, pull the hell out of there if there's anything wrong- you understand me, Spartan?" John felt like Smith was treating him as his son. John had no family, so actually, Smith was the closest thing to a father he had. "Sir, yes sir." At John's cold 'yes', the car stopped. He waved to the Captain, and slowly walked to the bay. There was a gate similar to the one at Delta- but there was no amiable Chuck. He walked over to the guard, who was a man built like Smith but ugly as sin.. "Are you John Peterson, SPARTAN-386?" The Spartan nodded, and the gate opened slowly, as if to give John time to comprehend the majesty of the base.

The ship looked much bigger now, though it probably only had what John would guess to be about 3,600 square feet in the central part.. Nothing compared to a real ship. There were two long points coming from the front of the ship and a central hub in the middle. It looked more like a fighter or a floating base than an explorer, which made sense, seeing as he might be on that construct for a while. He put nothing close to a dent in it with his own height. The base beside it was white with a gray roof, with a dome shape. Hundreds of beams held up the rocket, and kind of looked like licorice. The Spartan almost gasped at his own thoughts- licorice?!- they were beams, not sugar. Really, he must have been hungry. He shook his head and stepped

into the base, people staring at him. He had on a pair of baggy camo pants with a black tank top, mainly because it was easy to put on. After long hallways and plenty of scientists who were probably billionfold his own intelligence, he finally came to an elevator. After a long trip upward, he was directed, escorted, sterilized and searched until he finally reached it. The rocket. There it was, begging to be ridden. He climbed in and sat facing up, almost anxious to get going. He looked to his side, and almost gasped as another one of his old friend's voices filled his ears quickly. "Well, John! Sure has been a while."

He turned to see Jack Quinton, a man he grew up with. This man was always the scrawny, optimistic, and loyal friend. He was with no doubt the youngest member of the crew, at 24. His combat skills are remarkable, and he cleared through ranks quickly in his old merc group, MAXX. He left MAXX, though, mainly because they were nowhere near his class, and he knew it. So he left, now a lone mercenary, looking for a good mission or two. He'd just found it.

"Quinton? Is that you?" Jack nodded in that childish way he did everything. "Yeah, Johnnyboy, it's me! How ya been?" John smiled. He absolutely hated being called that. "Great. Red's getting huge, ya know. You should see him." Jack beamed. "Yeah? Cool. Well, I guess we're off, eh? You know, we sure have an interesting crew!" John turned to see what seemed to be an android- she had a beautiful face, though not real, and had a metal left hand. Her cold eyes and firm posture confirmed she wasn't human, which was possible nowadays. To her left sat a man, who seemed as battle-hardened as John. He had a blue jacket which read, "STONES" on it, with a few medals. Military issue- perhaps he was in the Army, because John hadn't seen him before. This man looked strong in a way different from Smith or that creep down at the front gate that was not Chuck. Behind the 'droid was a big guy. Not muscular, really, but freakishly tall. Maybe 6'7". He, too, had a hardened face. It was strong and his eyes held a deep and dark wisdom. He had no facial hair, and was bald except for two strands of pitch-black hair behind both ears. They came down into braids that snaked downward all the way to his stomach. He looked like he belonged in a bike gang.

A scientist walked in, and looked at everyone. "This is it, fellas," he said, with a friendly tone. "Here we go. Good luck, and hang on to your hats. And everything else, heh."

The ship lurched, and thunder was heard from below. This was it. After years and years of dreaming, he was finally going to be in space.

As they flew through the air, the blue sky seemed to melt away and become a tasteless, black abyss of dotted stars. "Hold on to everything you've got, guys," Quinton advised. "I have a feeling this is gonna be one unforgettable mission."

He knew not how right he was.

## Chapter 2:

Luckily, during the preparations, they all had on spacesuits. The antigravitational feel of this new universe seemed surreal, only things John had dreamed of. Almost sickening, a reverie of silence and mystery; breakable by nothing. Except an extremely loud and

static-filled blast from the radio. "Quinton! You're headed toward the construct, correct?", a gruff voice boomed. It wasn't Smith, maybe an acquaintance of Jack's. "Yes, sir. All operations look normal, readouts just fine. This is pretty insane, Randall," Quinton said in a joking voice. The radio replied, "Well, son, what you'll find up there is worth it."

"Right, I'm sure it will be. No problems, sir. I'll radio you once we land, or have a stable orbit. For now, we're focusing on finding the damn thingâ€¦" Quinton said, looking around for any sign of a circular object.

"Quintonâ€¦who exactly was assigned captain of this project?" John asked, hoping it wouldn't be him. Jack looked around as if confused. "They didn't tell you? You areâ€¦sir!" Jack said with a smile visible behind his visor. He snapped a slow-motion salute. The new MJOLNIR armor, Mark X, gave him the ability to breathe both underwater and in space, for rather large oxygen tanks were in a raised spot on his back. The tanks held a lot- enabling him to breathe for an estimated 48 hours with no need to replenish, and if he did need to, there were dozens of oxygen tanks for all of the crew somewhere in the ship. The White Feather lurched again, and John looked at Quinton, their pilot.

"What? I just increased speed; I'm gonna see if we can find this construct and park our bird in one sitting."

John felt an immediate and powerful urge to slap him. "Are you insane, Quinton? That thing is thousands of miles away! Not to mention, if we can't see it-"

Suddenly, words escaped the Spartan as a gigantic, orb-shapedâ€¦thing materialized in front of the ship. It looked like an intact Death Star, minus that crater at the top. Behind them, the android gasped. "My Godâ€¦" she said, absolute wonder in her voice, to no surprise. The 'STONES' man gasped as well. "What is that thing?" he whispered to himself. The tallest man had nothing to say, but his gaping and wondrous look was almost comic and certainly unforgettable. Quinton started laughing in triumph. "Lookie here! Only a few hours out hereâ€¦and we're right in front of a huge discoveryâ€¦" John laughed with him. Words couldn't express his sudden and erratic feelings of excitement, curiosity, and even hope. "We're getting there." John announced firmly. Jack looked at him with an eyebrow raised. "Yeahâ€¦what are you thinking, Johnnyboy? You've got that gleam," Truly, John was unmistakable for the gleam in his bright blue eyes, one so bright people tended to see it through his visor. The sparkle occurred when he thought of something big. And Quinton knew what he was thinking of.

Nothing truly exciting happened for the next while, save the entire crew gawking at the dark purple structure that slowly grew larger.

The quiet was awkward. Uncomfortably so. Luckily, the android willingly broke it with an almost humanly shakiness. "I am SAI C1-F. Also known as Rhonda." John grunted. "Nice to meet you. I am John Peterson." Jack spoke up and opened his arms as if to accept an embrace. "There y'are, Johnnyboy. We're all as excited as you are." Jack turned to the rest of the crew. "Soâ€¦y'know, how about the rest of you? Look at us! A highly trained and highly paid merc team that

doesn't even know each other's names! Let's introduce ourselves. Hello! I'm Jack Quinton, MAXX retiree and I'm 24 years old! I like dogs, birds, and long, romantic walks in unknown spacecraft," Jack said in what sounded to be one entire immaturely fast-paced sentence. He looked at the STONES-man.

"And who might you be?" The man stood in his suit. "I am Kyle Stones," he said with what was either strength or conceit, "retired Spartan. People like to call me Blade." Jack stifled a laugh, but it made John think. Another Spartan? Not to mention, a retired one? How could you retire from that? It was, after all, a lifestyle, not a career. And it was one he never metâ€¦odd. Stones took his seat again, and the man in the back stood. He almost had to slouch to avoid hitting the top of the craft. He was clad in a tight and blank black T-shirt and orange nylon pants that wrinkled in many places. John felt overheated upon sight, wondering how he could stand those.

"Helloâ€¦I am known as Raven." The man sat down and said nothing more. He looked Native American, which maybe had something to do with his name. Perhaps it was a nickname. Whatever the case, that guy was tall. Rhonda gave a look to him that almost said, 'What was that about'?

Jack impulsively slammed a button and the thunder in the background grew. "Don't worry, allâ€¦just up-ing the speed...again," Jack said in an attemptedly comforting voice. The huge structure only grew. It was colossal, and made John and others wonder how it had gone unseen all these years. This just seemed so odd, and everything was coming so fast. There was something on the surface of this craft that caught John's eye. A symbol. "Look! Jack, look!" the Spartan exclaimed, standing up quickly and pointing to it. Jack squinted. "What theâ€¦"

The symbol looked like a rectangle with no bottom, and another bar going down on the left side parallel with the first. It had small spokes going left and down from the right bar, almost forming the square 'right-angle' symbol.. Next to it was a dot, a thick dot. Under that was an elongated gash in the metal. John also pointed to that. "There. We can get through there." Jack nodded. "What I was planning to do." Though it was hundreds of miles away, John felt as though the biggest discovery known to man- in history- would soon be under him. And he was entirely right. Later, he would definitely consider this a big discovery.

It was hours, seemingly an eternity before the structure was truly visible. It was amazing, and with all of the dents, marks, stains, burns, cuts, slits, and other wounds it looked to be millions of years old. "We're so closeâ€¦" Rhonda whispered, yet loud enough to hear.

"Beautifulâ€¦" John whispered, standing. Well, more like floating. The entrance zone only got bigger and bigger. "John," Jack addressed, breaking another silence that wasn't really wanting to be broken. John turned to face him, but said nothing- just waited for a response. "You knowâ€¦this is going to be one hell of a mission. Nobody knows what's up there, and space probes haven't returned. Some peopleâ€¦could die, y'know?"

John looked ahead toward the structure. "No," he said firmly. "Some

people will return home as heroes. No one on my ship will die."

Jack smiled. "You always hated death, John," he said in a low voice. John glared at the structure as though it were Quinton. "Maybe so. But if this mission takes even a single soul, it won't be in vain."

Quinton scoffed. "John, calm down. You're sounding...cryptic! This is a million-year-old structure. What exactly could live here?"

It was true- being that there was that large gash- their soon-to-be landing zone- there would be no oxygen in there. And the only possible thing would be some species of bacterium, or something that required no oxygen.

"Captain!," interjected someone. "Something on the structure is moving!" The voice sounded young, no doubt a crewman working in the back. "What do you mean?" John asked, noting the look of panic on the crew's face. "Sirâ€¦look in front of youâ€¦" the man said cautiously. John couldn't believe his eyes- the gashâ€¦was sealing.

Quinton gasped, along with Rhonda. Stones pointed at it with absolute marvel. "Look at this! It has a self-reparation system!" This was amazing- who could have turned it on? Nothing would live inside, right? And why would the gash seem to melt away now, right as the crew of approximately 100 (counting the workers and dudes in the engine room) approached? "This is great," Jack interrupted, "but where are we gonna land now?!" It was a question that shouldn't have arisen.

"He has a point," Raven concurred. He was so quiet, John forgot he was there. "There's a door," John explained. Sure enough, a rectangle-shaped frame with the same symbol in the middle was a short while above them, then to the left. Quinton smiled. "We're goin' in, I'll change course," he said with his normal amount of ambition. The ever-present roar in the background grew huge like a piece of music in crescendo, and the object started becoming closer a lot quicker than it had been. Stones laughed. "This is amazingâ€¦" John nodded, though Kyle didn't see it. "Yeahâ€¦do you know how much we'll get paid for this?!" John said jokingly. Rhonda laughed an oddly humanistic laugh. "Knowing my normal employers, not much more than usual. Y'know, maybe five bucks." The small cockpit filled with light laughter, even from Raven. Then, the door John had spotted opened. The cockpit's echoing laugh changed into a gasp as everyone saw it.

"Here goes," Quinton announced, as the ship flew in the direction. "Everyone, prepare for landing. This may prove bumpy. Hold on to something," John advised with utmost seriousness. As they approached the gigantic door at near-top speed, a screaming whine was heard, everything went white, and then black. John heard the word, whispered by an ancient voice, \_Prophecy...\_

### Chapter 3:

The horrible, persistent, high-pitched screeching sound drilled holes throughout Peterson's skull.. Abruptly it ended when a familiar voice hit Jonathan Peterson's ears. "John? Johnnyboy? You OK? Wake upâ€¦" It was Quinton, that too-caring-for-others idiot. "You passed out a few hours ago, John-John. Right about the time we entered the



structure," he said comfortingly. His voice was soothing, more so than usual for some reason. John wanted to frown- they both were sounding pretty gay. "Whereâ€¦amâ€¦" John tried to ask, but his throat hurt. "Where are ya? Right now, we've got ya on a stretcher outside of the Nautilus." The Nautilus was the name of the large ship they intruded this magnificent structure on. "We found out somethin' amazing, Johnâ€¦it's breathable in here! And there's no stench or anything! The air's crisp and nowhere near stale- as if we were still on Earth! You really should open your eyes- though this place is dark, it's kindaâ€¦magical." Jack went on about the place some more, as John struggled to open his eyes. It was as if they weighed fifty pounds each. They finally opened, though everything was blurry at first. As his vision cleared, he felt coolness surround his body. "Coldâ€¦" he moaned. "You cold, John? Don't worry, I'll have Stanley get a blanket." Edward Stanley was a crew member who specialized in first aid. "Stanley, you heard me. On your feet, pal." John sat up and saw a man walk away, and studied this new environment.

The Spartan himself was extremely muscular, but not tall (for a Spartan, of course), coming in at a bit over seven feet. He had his trademark light-blue eyes and dark brown hair that was buzzed short.

This place was so dark, but it had windows. You could see Earth from the one John was placed by. "Beautifulâ€¦" John mouthed. Quinton received a blanket from Stanley, said thanks, and wrapped the Spartan in it in a snap. "Armorâ€¦where?" John said between quivers.

"Oh, your MJOLNIR? It's in storage for now. You gave us all a scare, John. You passed out in your armor and onto the control panel. You should see the dent in the dashboard," Jack said with a weak laugh. As John's senses returned to him gradually, he realized where he was. "My Godâ€¦am I in the structure?!" Quinton nodded with a snicker. "Wow, that took a while. But yeah, you sure are. Say, kinda chilly in here, huh?" Jack said, as if trying to change the subject. John nodded quite slowly, looking around. This place was huge and made of metal, with dark and quite ominous corridors and thick shadows slithering between everything.. The metal was still clean to the point where it shined. "Jackâ€¦this metal still shines," John marveled. "I know," Quinton said with childlike wonder. Then, in the corner of John's eye, there was a quick blue flash. "What the hell was that?" John said, looking in the area he saw it. "I saw it, tooâ€¦" Quinton admitted, now showing how frightened he was. "John, you should go check it out," Quinton ordered shakily. It was always funny how someone like him never went to see what it was, but had someone else do it for him. John began to walk until nobody else was around.

There was a crack of miniature lightning, then a horrified scream followed by silence. John quickly sprang up and leaped toward the direction of which it came. He turned to see something that confirmed the future for mostly everyone on this mission. There lied Stanley, with two neat holes through his head. The smell was horrible, but that was least of John's worries. For one thing, Stanley didn't bleed. \_What had done this?\_, he asked himself, searching desperately through his brain to conceive an answer. Then that answer came.

Later, John would have blamed shock for preventing Stanley from seeing what was directly in front of him. But now, he only looked

ahead to see a gigantic man in white armor with a dinosaur's head. There were three horns- two in the back and one in the front (the latter much like a rhino's). There it stood, holding a Covenant energy sword. It spoke some horrid distortion of a language to him, then literally sank into the floor without a trace. John stood there for a second, then heard Quinton.

Quinton retched at the sight of the poor crewman, obviously holding back a wall of vomit. Quinton sniffled. Though he did not know Stanley personally, he could tell he was a good person. John was scared beyond words- he was frozen in the place where he had seen the monster. Then, a shock of bravery- though barely anything- hit him. "John," Jack said shakily, "we need to get out of here. Now." The Spartan fell to his knees. "No!" he whispered. The loss of Stanley overwhelmed him for some reason, one he couldn't place. He barely knew the man, so why was he so upset? Was he in shock, from that thing? Jack was silent now. He was upset, but nothing compared to this Spartan. Shock. Yes, that must have been it. That white thing killed Stanley. The man wasn't bugged by the fact that one of their best meds was dead. It was that he couldn't do a thing about it.

About six hours later, the Spartan had calmed down. Quinton didn't speak another word about it, but it was obvious how badly he wanted to leave now. John was sitting in a cramped, orange-lighted cabin, thinking about one main thing: what the heck was that thing?

John stood up. The time for wallowing was over. He wanted to explore this place. He stepped out of his cabin and greeted every saluting crewman who he passed. He then glided out of the ship and into the cold, haunting halls of the place they'd now called 'Secret Land'. named after the entire mission, Secret Run. The place was so dark and mystifying. So enormous, and so mysterious. Slowly, the Spartan returned to the scene in which pictures of Stanley's melting flesh scarred his mind. There was one thing that startled him, though- a change in the scene.

There was no body.

John raised an eyebrow. This all made no sense. Part of him already wanted to leave, but another part of him- an ambitious, somewhat stupid part- told him to just keep going. The curiosity was too much, and it seemed no form of logic would stop this stubborn soldier.

He had a flash of memory. Of seeing his teammates die. That was what bothered him the most; when somebody under his command was killed. Not only did he blame himself, but he knew everyone else did, too. John shook the thoughts away.

He stared at the charred metal. The floor patterns looked scarily similar to that of Area X's. It was frightening, yet amazing, to find that perhaps the same things that built Area X built this masterpiece. There was no way this could be the work of early humans- it was already obvious any technology in here would be superior to the technology they have now. Slowly, he turned on the flashlight to the right of his head attached to his helmet and moved forward.

The place wasn't as dark as he anticipated. His boots clanked against the metal quietly. It was nice to have some sort of noise around- the silence in this place was deathly. Something caught his eye. John

spun around- to find a paper. It was white with scrawlings all over it. He gasped and grinned- a discovery! This wasn't here before! He bent over to pick it up- it was dry and felt as though it was ready to fall apart. On it were runes, hundreds of thousands of millions of them, covering every wall, almost impossible to count by the naked eye. Or by man alone. He stared in thought. Was this some ancient human writing? Some Star Wars thing where the past is like our future? The writing was carved into the metal very precisely. It seemed to have been made by machine. This was amazing.

John headed toward the ship, trying his hardest not to run. After a seeming eternity, John eyed the ship ahead of him. He held a gasp back as he saw and read, burned into the front of the ship in atrocious handwriting,

\_\*\*SO BEGINS THE PROph\*\*E\*\*CY\*\*\_

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All of it started at once. The lift, the gravity leaving, Tetsu feeling his stomach in his throat, everything. Tetsu felt the future of his would be bright. Or maybe it would be dark. Perhaps he didn't know. He stood there, still as any stone, watching as his home left. Suddenly, the artificial gravity took effect, and Tetsu's slow rise came to an immediate halt, followed by a prompt drop. The fall completely slipped Tetsu's mind, his entire being focused on the planet. It only went further and further away. He wanted it back.

Tetsu was a young. Trihorn, meaning he had two horns pointing in diagonally opposite directions on the back of his head, and one on the top of his snout. At a fragile 13, no one seemed to get along with him. It was for an unknown reason; he thought he was plenty nice. He had a few friends. One, Kankarolanseiya, was a tall one, with little triangular lumps above his eyes, almost like stubby skin-horns. That one was classified as a Doublehorn-Eye-Front. Also there was Stomp- a male Winged. He had a beak and the back of his head was elongated like most Winged. His eyes were triangular and cruel, which opposed his kind persona. His beak was sharp as a spear, much like his eyes. Another was Kalacemrononte, also known as KC. He was tall, at least 56 units. His head was also elongated in the back, but he had the front like everyone else- a gentle slope that went down and around, though he did not have as many teeth as Kankarolanseiya, or, preferredly, 713. They were all the same age, which allowed them to wind up in the same Learn Cycle. That was something he was grateful for. The three were close friends- they sometimes called themselves the Band Brothers. They named themselves this because of their bands- all had a black band encircling their neck, and another around their left arms' biceps. It was Tetsu's favorite part of their friendship- they were so close.

The Commu blasted, and then the sounds turned into words. "Learn Cycle units 354 and 355, report to Center for cycling. That is all." And with a quick static burp, Tetsu whipped around. He fought back tears as he saw it- the Center. A bell rang and thousands poured out, their day now free. Tetsu walked in after the mass had left the Center. Its architecture was like no other on the ship- it had huge rotating slabs of metal that seemed to guard the front. In the middle of it all was a large, cylindrical, pale green beam, known as the Pilot. This was where all systems were controlled. Surrounded by the

Pilot and the slabs- known as Ketkhu- Tetsu was the first in the Center- he wanted to be able to brag that he was the first in his Learn Cycle to report to the Center. He saw roughly a thousand chairs, then ran ahead for a while and took one at the front, panting heavily as he sat. He saw 713 and Stomp running toward him. "Wait up, will ya?" Stomp yelled, taking a seat next to him. 713 nodded, accompanied by an affirmative grunt. There was a stage in front of them, with a half-circle shape. On it a Guard.

Guards were normally tall and muscular. All of them wore brown overcoats, with hoods that covered the top of their head. It flows down and splits at the crotch, almost like a jacket and long pants sewn together. The outfit is normally sleeveless to show off their arms, which show off their rank. Each member of society wears a band of some sort, somewhere on their body. Black was a child or peon. Gold was an official- Guard, Honor Guard, or trader. Red meant prisoner or hostile. White was the Lord. The Lord was the king or leader of their society. Only he wore the sacred white band.

The Guard stood still, putting even the inanimate chairs to shame with his unflinching demeanor. He looked around with quick, accurate eyes, and noted that it seemed everyone was here. Tetsu turned to see the unsettling myriad of children which was only made of two Cycles. Each Cycle had an estimated 1,000 occupants. Usually more. Whoever couldn't make it to the ship was still Home. Home was what they called it. We called it Earth.

Tetsu slouched over, unlike 713, who always stood tall. KC had made his way and sat next to 713 earlier. KC was the tallest, but 713 was catching up. Beside Stomp was a raptor, he was called Rush. Mainly, of course, because of his speed. He was Stomp and 713's friend, but KC and Tetsu had yet to meet the constantly-hyper speed demon. The Guard checked again, and nodded to no one in particular. "Children," he addressed, in the nicest tone he could muster, "welcome to the Center. As you know, Learn Cycles will be far different from when we took residence in Home. You will now report to the Center when called for. After your Cycle is complete, you will return to your rooms, your families. Is this understood?" The entire crowd uttered a sloppy "Yes" in unison. There was even a "Yes, ma'am," somewhere. Good thing he was barely heard- if the Guard heard him, he would wring his neck. Literally. "Good," the Guard replied, a sickening smile on his face. "You two Cycles are lucky. Lord himself will be here to make sure everything works outâ€¦perfectly." An unexplainable ominous wave swept the crowd, and all fell silent. "To your rights and lefts are pods. Roughly three thousand," he explained, pointing to Tetsu's left. He saw nothing- perhaps the pods were covered by the shadows. "You will enter them and simply fall asleep. That is all you must do. The entire process takes a mere two hours," he comforted. Tetsu was still searching for one as KC did the same. Stomp and Rush were laughing about something, and 713 stood silent, as always. "Each has an imprint of your name, and the other Cycle students that have used it. They are all in alphabetical order. Now, find your pod, enter it, and sweet dreams." Tetsu shot up and ran to the left. He was in the A's. He ran down the rows, and he was all the way down to R when he realized he forgot to say goodbye to his friends.

Oh, well. There was no time. Panting, he decided to walk the rest of the way. He was exploring the T's when he noticed something that puzzled him- his pod had no other names on it. Just "TETSU". Why would he have his own individual pod? He spent no time pondering,

however, pressed a large red button that read OPEN, and climbed in. Sensing high heat and no motion, the door closed and sealed. Tetsu drifted off, and he felt something prick his neck, but didn't care.

## Chapter 4

Tetsu awoke with a start. He opened his eyes immediately. He only saw a turquoise-tinted glass cover in front of him. He remembered quickly- he was in the pod. A voice echoed through his mind and ears in a flash. "Learn Cycle over. Units 354 and 355 may now report to any part of the ship as you wish. Have a good day." The conclusion to the dreary experience was all but comforting. Or relieving.

Tetsu sluggishly pulled himself out of the secluded chamber and saw KC in his face. He stared with eyes deceived by a strong turquoise blur. "KC?" he asked blankly. "Yeah. Man, that was weird" KC replied, shaking his head in confusion. Tetsu nodded. "Yes. Suddenly I feel different," Tetsu stuttered, the correct adjectives escaping him. "Yeah but I don't know what," KC agreed. "Know what I mean?"

Just then, 713 walked toward them, his usual unfriendly face worn. He raised his head in greeting at Tetsu, who waved back. KC looked up to them both, despite his size. Tetsu loved his friends- they were like brothers to him. Stomp flew in, literally, and landed beside 713. He leaned on him as Rush, the fastest one in Tetsu's learn cycle, ran and skidded to an abrupt halt beside Stomp. Tetsu waved to them both as Stomp gave Rush a pat on the back. "So," Stomp said, breaking a momentary silence, "I suppose we return to our rooms." Tetsu and the others nodded. KC was the first to leave. They all said their goodbyes and spread out to their rooms, after the mass of children did just that. Tetsu, however, just returned to that window. He longingly stared at what was Home. He missed it. He wanted to go back. Back to the warm days, cool nights, swimming in the ponds, the other friends of his he was forced to leave. He hated them; he hated those that made him go. It was Lord. It was his fault, Tetsu thought. But, luckily for him, he had friends with him, so he wasn't alone. Life was uneventful. And it was, sadly, just how Tetsu liked it.

He heard some sets of approaching footsteps behind him. They only got louder and louder as Tetsu drew frivolous pictures in the condensation on the window from his own breath. He paid no regard to something approaching from behind that would soon change his life.

Behind him walked three, all of which were in his Cycle. All of them had their own nicknames, as the language names they were given were usually far too long. One was called Dagger, who was Tetsu's cousin. Dagger always hated Tetsu for a reason surely only explained by prophecy. Then there was Roll. He was an odd, short male whose speed compared to that of Rush- and he was the fastest in his Cycle. He had Rush's entire body- Nohorn Slanted- but Rush was beige with black stripes, and Roll was a dark tan with very dark green stripes. Behind them was a large one- he looked a lot like 713. Same coloring and head/body division, but 713 was taller- this one stood around 63 units, or 7 feet, while Tetsu stood at 54 units, around 6 feet. The largest one carried with him a blade- one a little larger and more ornate than a machete. The handle was golden and the blade itself wore decorative spines near the hilt.

Dagger's sharp voice suddenly split the quiet. "Hello, little cousin. Nice to see they put you in this 'marvel', too. I'd hate to see you stay Home," he quipped with a snort. Tetsu turned with an annoyed look and half-lidded eyes. "Dagger. My loving cousin. What a joy it is to see you," he drawled with much sarcasm. Dagger's short tolerance for Tetsu already began to show. "You listen to me, runt," Dagger barked, pointing to him. "We've come to teach you a lesson in respect. So, get ready for the lesson of your life," he said, cracking his knuckles with frightening madness and malice. The tall one, who was called Eno, drew the blade and slowly walked to Tetsu, a horrible-bordering on insane- gleam in his eyes. Tetsu wasn't scared at all.

The Trihorn started to back away- the blade could slide through him easily, and he knew it. Suddenly, Roll flanked him with strange agility and yelled something incoherent as he held him against the wall. Dagger approached his cousin with a grimace of sheer and impossible malice, then punched him in the torso several times with vigor. Tetsu felt the wind get knocked out of him, as he simply let Roll hold him and Dagger strike him, over and over again. After Dagger finished, he moved to the side as Roll turned him around so that his back and tail faced the one with the blade. Eno moved in and laughed insanely. "This will only take a minute," he said smiling. Dagger was obviously enjoying this. Sick freak, thought Tetsu bitterly. Then something under Tetsu's mind kicked in.

Quite suddenly, in what was seemingly fractions of a second, Roll was coughing on the floor. Tetsu wore a 'you picked the wrong man to mess with' look as he glared into Eno's eyes. Eno smiled wickedly, and waved his blade as if to remind Tetsu of it. He could care less. Tetsu growled and bared razor-sharp teeth, as a nerve in his neck bulged disgustingly. He sprinted in Eno's direction, jumped, and landed on his shoulders. Tetsu put up a fist, and made it come into contact with his face. Bones broke.

Eno screamed in raging agony and swung the blade aimlessly, which happened to strike Tetsu's tail. The worst part was the wound's location- he was cut along a tendon, rendering everything below the cut on his tail useless. Numb. Tetsu winced, ending his reaction was over. Another blow to the side of Eno's head quickly rendered him unconscious. He was out before he hit the floor. Tetsu spun around right in the nick of time to see Roll charging at him. It was unsuccessful.

Tetsu simply went to the right and put a foot in place of where he once stood, sending Roll directly to the floor. Tetsu pounced on him as well, and hit him in the back. Hard. He then turned and grabbed his tail. Much to Roll, Dagger, and even Tetsu's surprise, he lifted him. Roll was in the air. Tetsu threw him to the other side, slamming his head into the hard metal floor, also sending him to dream land. He then looked at Dagger, whose eyes were as wide as saucers. He took two steps back, but he knew he couldn't outrun this monster. Tetsu's eyes were crimson, either with adrenaline, excitement, or insanity. Perhaps a mixture. Dagger, fearful for his life, turned and sprinted. He ran past crowds of people, males, females, children, infants, he didn't care. He was scared now. He looked back for a second, and saw the same monster right behind him. Tetsu tackled him to the ground, knocking the wind out of him. He then turned Dagger over, and began to strike. Not the head. Tetsu knew not what overcame him, but for

some reason, he wanted Dagger to hurt. To suffer, as he made Tetsu do just a while ago. It didn't matter now that he was family. That Dagger's spilled blood was his own. Nothing did, not until these threats were neutralized. Dagger screamed, yelled and cried, but none of it registered. Finally, from the pain of it all, Dagger was knocked out. Tetsu stood, his sense slowly returning. He looked at his hands and gasped.

There was more blood on them than there was on the floor.

Just then, a scrawny- but fast- Guard sprinted to Tetsu, carrying two unconscious bodies which dangled in his arms. He gasped at the sight.

Tetsu's hands were wet with blood, from all three of his attackers. His clothing- a brown robe, as all children had- was pretty clean, though. The Guard gently laid down the bodies and pointed to Tetsu. "Youâ€|did you do this?"

Tetsu lowered his head and frowned, ashamed. It was his cousin, and people his own age, who he had nearly killed. The Guard knew it was Tetsu, and he glared at him.

"Stay here," he instructed harshly, as if speaking to a felon. He quickly snatched his Mincom from his robe pocket and signaled in. A few minutes and questions later, an Honor Guard approached.

Honor Guards were the highest class. They had crimson armor that plated their bodies head to toe. They had helmets which only covered the tip of their head and had two glowing horns protruding from the top. They usually carried staffs, with long, black handles and a red sphere at the top. From that extended three long blades, made of the same material their horns were. Honor Guards were masters in all forms of combat, and would never let Lord down.

"Guard, what is the problem here?" The Guard replied at first with a glare that asked 'are you serious?' The Guard motioned to Tetsu. "He was found beating these three senseless," the Guard reported loyally. "They are all three unconscious as well." The Honor Guard studied Tetsu and seemed astonished. "This one?" he asked in a voice that sounded almost sarcastically awestruck. The Guard nodded. "Yes. I saw him with the one who my scanner read as 'Eno'. He nearly split his skull. The other, called 'Roll' had taken severe internal damage. The third, who was even related to this one, was called 'Dagger'. He suffered bruises to the torso, severe ones- there may be internal bleeding. I will take these three to the hospital at once," he said, speaking swiftly. The Honor Guard nodded to him as the Guard activated a nearby teleporter to take them all to the Center. The Honor Guard's view instantly switched to Tetsu.

"Childâ€|you took them all? Alone?" Tetsu nodded shyly, and added, "Eno had a weaponâ€|" The Honor Guard almost lost it. "A weapon?! And you stillâ€|?" Tetsu nodded again, still ashamed. The Honor Guard, however, seemed almostâ€|pleased. He shot a creepy smile to Tetsu. "Come with me, child. I will inform your room of the situation, and you will have to deal with your punishment when you return." After the warning that brought unsettling images to Tetsu's head, the Honor Guard punched in a long series of keys into the pad on his arm which all officials in the ship had. A small blip was heard, and he nodded, once again looking at Tetsu. "There. Now, come with me." He turned

and activated the same teleporter the previous guard had used, only punched in a different number on the pad to the side. It activated with a whine and a green beam appeared, extending from the top of the small indented 'room' to the bottom. The Honor Guard promptly stepped through, Tetsu behind him.

Tetsu felt an indescribable tingle, like he was torn into millions of pieces and put back together at lightening speed. Nausea played hell with his stomach until, all of the sudden, a room materialized. Then stairs. They were rising. The Honor Guard was steps ahead of him. He turned. "Now follow me, child," he instructed gently. Tetsu did just that. The hall was glorious and ornate, paintings and scriptures decorating everything everywhere. Where was he? The stairs were a dark purple, along with the walls. And ceiling. The borders of the stairs were a lighter purple, more of an indigo. He knew where he was. He was in the Core; a place above the Center where three were. Three. The sacred three. Was he going to meet them? He could only hope.

After a long and tiring stair hike, the Guard stopped. "What you will soon see, hear, and learn," he began, "is never to leave. Do you so understand?" Tetsu nodded, his right claw across his chest. "Good," the Guard replied. The only weird part was that there was no door. Just a wall was in front of them. No more. Of course, Tetsu didn't expect what happened next. A small crack slowly slid through the wall, making intricate and symmetrical shapes and patterns as it did. Suddenly, they slipped in two, and a door was revealed. Then, a metallic, booming, and smooth voice was heard saying, "Enter. May the Gods be with you." It was an ominous greeting, but Tetsu couldn't be more excited. Of course, he was hiding it, but he knew who was behind the- well, what is now- door, laid the Three. The Prophets.

Truth, Mercy, and Regret. They were the most respected members of the legion, next to the Lord. Their genius was almost always mistaken for psychic powers. They were said to be able to read minds, see thoughts, interpret dreams, and even see the future. Often it was their intelligence which was at fault for these preposterous accusations, but there were some occasions where para-normality was at play. In one case, a man was dying. The Prophet of Truth, their leader, suggested he see all of his family one day. The family wondered why. The next day, that man died.

The Guard looked at Tetsu with a smile. "Enter, young one. The Prophets will know." Tetsu gave him a confused look, but turned and went in.

The room, at first, was entirely black. Nothing was visible until Tetsu took a few steps. Three letters lit up in a triangle shape in front of him- an M at the bottom left, an R at the bottom right, and at the tip of the triangle, a T. Orbs circled the letters, and they all connected by shooting electricity, practically lightning, at the symbol by it, making a triangle. The lightning went away, along with the orbs, and the letters floated back. The lights flashed on, revealing three men. They all had a metal coating covering their skin, and all that showed was their slanted, cold eyes. They all also had a bead-crafted necklace, a hoverchair, and were all muscular.

The Prophet of Mercy had rings around his eyes and one on the back of his head. He was the reason of the Three, and the first. Above his



head levitated a golden crown with a diamond in the middle. It had the shape of an upside-down 'T', with a small orb floating at the top- a little smaller than a pea. All Prophets had a different crown. His shoulder pieces were spherical and the letter 'R' engraved on either of them. His right arm was where the metal ended, which became white fur. His other arm was the same, and you could often see them crossed.

The Prophet of Regret had a ring around the back and front of his head. His crown looked a lot like Mercy's, but the top split into two spines. Two orbs floated a little above their tips. His shoulders were spheres, like the other two, but had a horn extruding from both. They also had 'R' engraved on each one. His arms were covered with the metal, but his claws were extended out. Regret was the most intelligent of the three, and used his gift to aid his brothers.

Finally, the Prophet of Truth. He was the leader of the Prophets. His crown had a 'W' shape, with the jewel of course, and the middle horn had three spines, making a miniature second 'W' shape, with three orbs levitating about a centimeter above them as well. His head had a red stripe down the middle, interrupted by his two horns- one in front of the other- and then the stripe continues on. His right hand had only his claws bared, like Regret, but his other handâ€|wasn't there. It was a hole, used as a cannon for defense.

The Prophets were advisors to the Lord, protectors of the people, trainers of the monstrous Juggernauts, and leaders of the mysterious Shadows.

The Three became visible, a giant window behind them. "Welcome," Truth greeted. "We have received word of what you have done, Tetsu," Regret drolled, sounding almost disappointed. "And, frankly, we are more than impressed." "You handled the situation with surprising power and speed for one your age," Mercy said in monotone. "We have made a decision, youth. One you will thank us for," Truth continued. "Though it may be early, we are relatively certain you will be good for this role which we have chosen," Mercy said, making a 'V' angle with his arm, his hand facing Truth. "We have monitored your life, Tetsu, and you are the exact material of which we need. You will come of age, and will be suitable for this role," Truth said. Tetsu raised a brow. "Role? Excellency, exactly what do you mean?" Truth smiled under the cold, metallic skin. "You are going to play many parts in our race's story- perhaps the most important."

Tetsu cocked his head to the side. "Excellency? I am afraid I do not understand," he admitted, no shame in his voice. Who \_could\_ understand this?

"You," Truth said, rising from his normally slightly slouched position, "are to be the next Lord."

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## Chapter 5:

A mixture of feelings sloshed inside John's stomach. Fear, shock, and curiosity. Mostly, though, fear.

John ran to the ship and inside to see the main crew inside. Raven

was sitting down, Rhonda sitting closely next to him. She was gently cooing almost inaudibly to the man. John looked at his face. It was a look of horror. The man shivered, and kept repeating, "Monsterâ€¦demonâ€¦" in a soft, yet obviously disturbed voice. In a chair about two meters away from him was Quinton, sipping what looked like hot cocoa and saying nothing. Stones was sitting in the chair he sat in during flight, looking disgusted. He did not seem scared at all, more like curious. "Stones," John addressed. "What happened here?" Stones looked up, a solemn look on his face. "Sir. Somethingâ€¦well, we can't explain itâ€¦" "Talk to me, Stones. These soldiers don't look like they had fun while I was gone. Spill what you can- that's an order." Stones frowned, and spoke while looking at Raven. "Somethingâ€¦huge. Around 8 feet, by my estimate. Maybe 8'2". It had three horns and was all white. The horns were white, too. One was on the front of his head- like a rhino. The other two were at the back of his head, one diagonally facing left, the other, right. Heâ€¦well, his shapeâ€¦he looked like a dinosaur. A T-rex, only his arms were developed, proportional to ours. He had on a long cape, white, of course, and his eyesâ€¦" John was confused- was this guy sane? "Go on." "They were on the side of the head, like a T-rex's, onlyâ€¦they were so scaryâ€¦the outsides of the eye were black- the inside of his armor. The color was black as well, the whites...were red. Crimson. His armor was all white, and he had a pretty large chest, so he was prob'ly muscular. His tail was long, and armored. The last 3 feet of it, about, were replaced by a huge, spiked metalâ€¦thingâ€¦. It looked like a drill with more drills attachedâ€¦on his chest was a symbol- the same symbol on the outside of this hellholeâ€¦"

John gasped. He could imagine this thing- and he didn't like it. But he shook it off for now. "Continueâ€¦" > "It spokeâ€¦English. It had a Covenant Energy Sword with it-" John held out a hand. "Wait, wait, wait," the Spartan interrupted. "A <em>Covenant <em>Energy Sword? Do you think he's with the Covenant?"

Stones laughed. "Hell no! If that thing were to come near any of them, they'd shit themselves and slipspace the hell out of here."

John nodded. "Alright. Now, you said it spoke. What did it say?" Stones stood straight and spoke in a deep, overly dramatic tone. "'By my decree, you shall leave this place or you shall die. Retreat and survive. Stay and die a thousand deaths.' I wasn't the only one to see it- Raven and Quinton did, too. Raven apparently went into shockâ€¦Not sure why it scared him so badly." John nodded, his hand on his chin. "Thank you, Stones." He strode to Quinton and tapped his shoulder. "You saw it?" Quinton nodded. He then spoke with an immature fear, one of a child experiencing its first vivid nightmare. "God, it was scary, Johnâ€¦his voice was so deep and smooth, I swear I was staring at Satanâ€¦" John put his hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry. You all stay in here- I'm going to explore this place more after a quick chat with our friendly neighborhood cyborg." John turned and faced Raven, trying not to look at him. Never before had he seen this, not even in Area X. He glanced at Rhonda, who was leaning on him in a desperate effort to calm him down- and to no such avail. "Rhonda," John whispered. She looked up and John motioned for her to follow him out of the room. She stood, and John strode out, sharply turning around on his left heel after the door shut. She snapped a salute which the Spartan lazily returned. "Sir? What is

it?" she asked in monotone. "Did you see it?" John asked, knowing she knew what 'it' was. "No," she said honestly, "I'm afraid I didn't get the honor. But it sure scared the hell out of Raven." John nodded. "Yeah. That's been pretty obvious. What did you get out of him?" Rhonda shook her head. "Nothing. Just some babble-" John frowned inside of his helmet. "Babble isn't always 'nothing'. What did he say?" Rhonda shuddered. "The eyesâ€¦and something that I believe I could make out as 'blood'." John nodded. "You sure that's all?" Rhonda smiled. "If I knew any more, I'd tell you, human." John winced. Being called 'human' so condescendingly wasn't good. "Rightâ€¦. So, everyone's alright, save Raven?" Rhonda nodded. "Yes, pretty much." She respectfully snapped a mechanical salute, which was returned by the Spartan. John turned and left the ship to examine the mark. How did this thing know English? It obviously wasn't human from its description.

The ominous message was carved into the ship's stern, and smoke was still coming from it. Barely any, but enough to be seen. "So," John said to himself, "He burned this inâ€¦" Under the message was the same symbol. The same rectangle, the one missing a bottom, with two ticks in the upper right corner, as if marking a right angle, and a second line to the right of the rectangle's left wall. To top it all off, a solid black dot inches away from the bottom right of the mark. \_What was this? What did it mean or signify? \_John thought.

Weeks passed. Nothing new. John had explored more and found something, but it seemed unimportant. However, after a quick inspection from Rhonda, what was a small, curved handle was identified as a crimson Covenant Energy Sword.

"You mean the Covenantâ€¦aren't gone?" Quinton asked Rhonda after her announcement, shocked.

"No, not the Covenantâ€¦" she said quietly. "Thenâ€¦what?," John asked. Rhonda looked to the floor, knowing she could not answer. "I have no idea..."

Blade's voice was suddenly heard behind them. "Forerunners," he said simply. "These things are Forerunners. \_The \_Forerunners. That's the only logical explanation."

The room was silent. Deathly silent. John shook his head, though, and finally broke it. "That's impossible. According to what we knew of Covenant lore, they activated Halo- wiping out their species."

Blade shook his head as well. "No. Listen. Halo was almost exactly like Earth, right?"

John thought for a second. "...Correct."

"Exactly! They modeled Halo after Earth...because they came from Earth."

The idea struck John like lightning- why hadn't he thought of it before? "Of course..." he whispered, as if having a revelation of sorts. so many answers were finally brought to John's attention, all at once. It explained Area X's architecture...and what it held. Area X must have been one of their many attempts at containment of the Flood. And perhaps one of the only successful ones.

"Wow," Jack thought aloud. "That made sense."

The rest were silent for a bit.

"There have never been any other species recorded on Earth," Rhonda explained calmly.

John frowned under his helmet. He remembered Stones saying, \_A T-rex...\_

"Except dinosaurs," Stones said before John had the chance. "Motherfucking \_dinosaurs\_."

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## Chapter 6

Silence. The silence. Nothing had ever been so unnerving or quite so palpable- not even the cold.

The intimidating ornate, gigantic doors, by far above 40 feet, looming over a slightly older Tetsu. Behind him were his friends, equally amazed. They secretly all thanked The One that they did not have to trek into what must be a yawning, ever-dark catacomb system.

"When I come out," Tetsu said, not moving anything but his mouth, "I will never be the same."

Akeishi, a new addition to Tetsu's clique, shuffled. "I think you'll be the same."

713 and KC nodded, Rush was still gawking at the door, and Stomp was silent.

"The Prophets' will be done," 713 said in his usual depressed (and, frankly, \_depressing\_) tone. Tetsu turned to face him and nodded. "I'll miss you all. Return to me here on the 9th day of the 9th month...and my training will be completed."

Rush looked like he was about to cry, along with KC. The others stared in admiration and maybe envy. "We'll miss you, but at least you're not the only one going through rigorous training!" Akeishi chirped, in a fruitless attempt to cheer Tetsu up. Though Tetsu did grin, he said nothing more.

He approached the doors, and they slid apart in an ancient, dying metallic creek. It was completely black through the door.

Tetsu stood right in front of it, the widening chasm yawning before him. He turned to face them and said,

"\_Ye lero dek nero au.\_"

Tetsu turned back around and was swallowed whole by the black maw.

The artificial rain began to fall.

That was the last all of them saw of the old Tetsu.

This place was humid. Humid and warm, and dark- as if he was in the Arter jungles. He saw a few lights in the distance, and he approached them.

In his head: \_Tetsu, you have arrived well on time. Approach me. For the next step you take will begin your journey.\_

Tetsu stopped dead. He darted his eyes around (only to see darkness) with much suspicion. He felt someone there, he felt eyes bore into his head, he felt them probing his mind with cold, razor-edged hands. He was afraid to take the next step...but he did. And as his foot hit the metal floor, a surge flew through him that numbed his body. After about three seconds, he fell to the ground. He heard the near-silent whir of the Prophet's hoverchair approach him, its ventilation wind giving off a breeze he could not feel. \_Welcome\_, the Prophet told him in his mind, \_to the Lord's Training.\_

Tetsu dreamt of something. Something vague...but real.

\_There he stood, thousands of Honor Guards below him, all wielding what he just knew were blades of unexplainable power. They glowed a bright and beautiful blue.\_

\_The Guards marched in perfect synchronization, looking like a giant wave of crimson with shimmering blue dabs. On the other side were another force...they were odd colors, wearing a disgusting brown armor and wielding steel weapons. These weapons, Tetsu knew, fired metallic projectiles. Though this was a brilliant invention, it was unholy. Tetsu felt as though these things had stolen something from him, from his race. He saw, in front of the Honor Guards, were the Juggernauts. They formed a sort of barrier in front of the Honor Guards, shields raised. Then, ahead of them, on the walls of this odd canyon, were hundreds of Shadows, running along the sides at supernatural speeds. The other things, which Tetsu identified still as hostiles, stupid creatures that stole something from him. Something sacred. Something big.\_

\_He felt himself go forward, and for an unknown reason, he tried to stop himself but was unable. This other him began to run. It leaned forward and went into an all-out sprint, the surrounding canyon walls blurring. The once crimson-wave effect of the Honor Guards quickly became a crimson-wall effect as he neared them. Tetsu felt the other him jerk to the left, scale the canyon wall, and begin to run with the Shadows. He looked back down to realize, with no little amount of shock, that he was seeing war. He watched as the two sides engaged- that is, as the Juggernauts mercilessly barreled through the other things- with awe, and almost whooped for his team. It was scary; this was a massacre, not a battle. The odd projectiles being fired at the Juggernauts (and a few times, the Shadows) did nothing. They missed, were deflected, or hit but...didn't work. It looked from here like a child with a brown finger was pushing steel wool to the side with it.

-

\_Tetsu found himself having leapt from the wall and onto the ground, feeling the fall and the grass below him now, smelling blood, hearing screams and bangs from the...the...\_yonek

\_He heard no screams from his people. These things must have felt as if being decimated by a silent plague. And, for some reason, Tetsu

liked the justification of that.\_

Tetsu awoke in a depressing and morbid cell, the atmosphere being the color of what comes out when you run a pen over.

He felt something...just something. Somewhere. No, behind him. He almost physically saw it, a Shadow. Tetsu felt this one had no friendly intentions.

Before the Shadow could disappear as they do in combat frequently, Tetsu spun around and grabbed him by the neck. The Shadow, too surprised to de-materialize to freedom, kicked at the young Tetsu with much, fruitless vigor.

The boy gripped hard, then dropped the pathetic 'warrior', sapping his pride and nearly killing him.

He felt someone watching him, and nearly jumped at the hovering silhouette in front of him. Only Tetsu's inherited yet weak night vision could let him see.

"You nearly killed him," a familiarly slick voice said. "Amazing. How did you know he was there?"

Tetsu groped in the dark, infuriated.

\_"What- Truth?! Excellency, I have no time, I must-!"\_

"Fret not," Truth said in his normally gliding voice, "for this is your training."

Tetsu was silent.

"I have given you a new outfit- you now bear no shirt, and some old children's pants I found."

Tetsu was silent.

"Now...bow down."

Tetsu was silent no longer. He felt a sudden and sour surge of disrespect and almost fury at the Prophet.

"Never will I bow, not even to a Prophet."

Truth just loved this one.

"Show respect, child."

Broadcasted from his feet was another unspeakable surge of pain, mercifully numbing most of him.

He fell to the ground, his legs pulled to the ground in helpless submission.

"I strongly admire this side of you, Tetsu. Unfortunately, you certainly shouldn't show it until nine years, on the ninth day of the ninth month."

Tetsu screamed in pain, most of his upper body burning and boiling

with a disgusting sizzle.

It stopped, and Tetsu fell limp, gasping for his breath. His blood boiled beneath his red skin, and he couldn't even turn his head to inspect the damage. His body, mostly his legs and head, buzzed strongly.

The Prophet activated something long and glowing. Something that crackled as it was activated with an ominous stinging sound. The Prophet hovered over to Tetsu, now 3 feet in front of him.

"Endure," Truth demanded, raising the whip in a way that was almost as bad as its following pain.

Truth brought it down with a horrid, scalding smack onto Tetsu's back. Tetsu only made an amplified groan, for he could not open his mouth.

After his horrible 'test', including the lovely package of forty-odd whips (and that many new scars), Tetsu rose and held back tears that built pressure and stung his eyes.

"If those tears of raw weakness escape your eyes," Truth hissed, "I will kill you. Now."

Tetsu stood straight in shock, and the worst part was that more were produced. Then, to Tetsu's terror (for he knew very well that Truth could and would kill him), he felt a tear run down his cold, half-numb cheek and off of his head, producing a drip that sounded louder than the Pilot.

Truth huffed, more one of disappointment. "I am so very sorry you could not be our next Lord," he said in an intimidatingly gentle voice. "I thought you had much more strength than this." Tetsu almost saw Truth smile. "Now, die, weakling."

Tetsu felt a hand wrap around his neck- it was hot but not solid. Tetsu quickly realized that this was not Truth's physical hand...but his mind holding him by the throat. In his mind he heard Truth: \_You will die young Tetsu you will die here\_

Tetsu felt something click in his own mind, ending the voices. He stopped struggling and stared directly into the bare eyes of the Prophet.

Truth did not know what happened then. There was a flash of light, and Truth was thrown out of his chair, his metal skin scraping on the metal floor.

When Truth leaned forward to look up, he saw the young fighter- no, young warrior- standing there, claws extended, eyes bulging, skin crimson.

"\_Never \_will you break me," he said, as Truth began to feel, dimly, a very small section of his brain bleed.

Truth widened his eyes, not sure of what happened. Tetsu still stood unharmed, breathless. The boy shoved questions of how he performed that into the back of his mind. Truth did not.

"'Su...what did you feel, just then?"

Tetsu stood strong, despite subtle mental pondering at being called 'Su.

"If I knew, Prophet...you would be dead."

Truth growled, and stood up, something he had not done in months. He approached his chair and hopped into it, Tetsu watching in concealed amazement as scrapes given to Truth's metal skin disappeared.

"I'm sure. You would have seized this power...and surely, I would be nothing but a headless body as of now."

Tetsu liked that Truth knew his power, but did not like the accompanying image that sentence brought. Which, for some reason, brought up another question of how he heard Truth speak when Truth's mouth was sealed under metal.

With a flick of his hand, Truth brushed the thought away.

"Take one step backward."

Tetsu felt weakened from this event, and knew it would happen again if he disobeyed. So he took a slow step backward, and was sucked backward into freezing blackness.

As he flew at a speed that hurt, he heard Truth say goodbye.

A wall stopped the flying quite fast.

It was pitch black, so dark that Tetsu saw nothing at all. At once, orange lights came on, and revealed one Juggernaut.

The Juggernaut roared at Tetsu, a sound that drilled his ears. Its left arm was covered with the standard Juggernaut weapon- the Defender. There are two pieces to this- one which covers most of the shoulder, and the other that runs down the forearm. It then comes out into a normally circular shape- it is customizable among higher ranks- to cover the hand entirely. It was meant for charging, the Juggernauts' forte. Unfortunately for Tetsu, that's exactly what the Juggernaut began to do.

The monster put its shield before himself, as if bowing, and began to sprint forward.

Tetsu leapt out of the way with half a second to spare as the Juggernaut unflinchingly crashed into the wall. He turned around and began to charge at Tetsu again, who stood wide-eyed like a deer in headlights.

Knowing he could not evade him this time, Tetsu closed his eyes and waited for it to be over.

The Juggernaut was about to contact Tetsu when, to both of their surprises, he stopped dead, frozen. Tetsu slowly crab-walked along the wall to the left. The Juggernaut stood for a few more seconds, then fell over all at once. He folded into a limp slump. Tetsu drew in a sharp gasp that hurt his throat. He saw, within the bulging eyes and face that laid in an expression of horrified disbelief, blood



begin to stream slowly out of one eye.

Tetsu turned and vomited, having never seen death before. Worse, he \_caused\_ it.

He felt a sharp voice bore into his head at once; he somehow instantly knew it to be Truth.

\_Funny\_, the slimy voice began. \_Our last Lord had to be taken out of this part- he almost died.\_

Tetsu found a deep growl form in his throat as his eyes darted throughout the room whose size remained a mystery. "Toy with me no more, Prophet!" Tetsu yelled, hearing a dull echo.

\_Toy? No, Tetsu, I test.\_

"You prod, you poke, you analyze for algorithms. You toy," Tetsu repeated, the bright, burning anger rising in his chest and throat.

\_I begin to lose patience with you. In return, I think I shall give you another test.\_

Before Tetsu could even respond, he was cast into darkness again- this time, pulled downward into an abysmal darkness.

When he landed, he hit the ground hard. It almost knocked the breath out of him.

He landed on what he knew were defiantly rocks. Hot rocks, none larger than his head. Of course, what really got him to stand up was the fact that they were all ablaze. In much pain now, he sprinted and sprinted, only to find more beneath his feet, which were becoming raw. Finally, he felt merciful metal touch his feet, producing a sizzle that almost made him vomit again.

\_Durable, for sure.\_ Truth smiled; Tetsu heard it in his voice.

With an absolutely silent black flash (Tetsu was surprised to see black in this darkness), Truth appeared in front of him. Without a word, he pointed behind Tetsu. The boy turned around.

There, now in front of him, was a very long strip of those hot rocks extending farther than he could see. They cast a vibrant orange light that never flickered.

"That, 'Su, is the path of the Lord. It must be walked across- \_not\_ run across- to show gained strength. At the end awaits the thing that will change you, a tool that will channel your anger and hatred and passion for the fight into power."

Tetsu frowned, confused. "What is this tool?"

Truth raised a hand. "I need not tell you. You have already seen this weapon of holy crusaders. The advancement of the late Lord Tetsen, the one you were named after. In your dreams you have seen it, for I have seen your dreams."

Tetsu stepped back, spooked. "I know not of what you speak of-"

"The \_blade, \_fool!" Truth darted over and slashed Tetsu across the face hard enough to knock him down. Tetsu held back hot tears of shame and rage, and stood back up, hiding inside wounds. "You mean the blue one," Tetsu whispered with an unwelcome wavering voice.

"Of course." He sighed. "Tetsu, the more time I spend with you, the more discouraged I am."

Shaking his head, the Prophet spun and hovered away into the blackness. As he did so: "Tomorrow I will have you fight three Shadows. I suggest you get as much rest here as you can."

Tetsu heard no more, and he fell to the ground manually. No. He fell to the unforgiving metal.

\_You're never going to see light again,\_ quipped a darker part of his mind. Tetsu made a fist and slammed the floor repeatedly, feeling veins bulging around his neck and arms. After about 15 minutes of this, he let some tears flow as he rolled over and went to sleep. When the Prophet returned the next day, he was shocked to see a large dent, with small jagged cracks surrounding it, in a metal stronger than anything that a race millions of years to be will discover.

Truth ignored it and leaned forward to Tetsu with such skill some Shadows could never achieve. He craned his neck forward and watched Tetsu sleep. His eyes did not move inside his head. Already finished waiting for Tetsu to open his eyes, yawn and stand, he reached over with a gliding and smooth hand. He skillfully used one claw to slash down Tetsu's neck in a blur, quite effectively awaking the child and almost knocking him over.

Tetsu stood quickly, right hand clasped over his wound that bled almost upon impact. He shook away the sleep and looked to the Prophet with betrayed eyes as he tried to attach himself to reality again.

"Good morning, Lord. Ready for the Shadows?"

Tetsu tried to gasp, but it only came as a dry and pathetic croak. Trying with much effort to ignore the pain (to the point where so much effort was being put into it that it was impossible), he stared into the exposed Prophet's eyes with a growing, hot frustration. "Truth, I would very much like a neckcloth for the bleeding-

Truth raised a hand to stop him, then announced: "No. You will face things much worse than this. Things where you may see your allies ripped into pieces. Blown into pieces, perhaps. And when you do, the blade will channel your rage, and you will use it for revenge. That is your life's goal, 'Su- nothing more than getting revenge, isn't that right?"

Tetsu tilted his head to the side, utterly confused. "Revenge?" he pondered, his right hand dyed maroon, "Great Prophet, I do not-

"Of course you do not understand," Truth interrupted for the second time. "You never will. Not until Dagger is dead. Not until you see the blade pierce his neck and end his words forever will you understand."

Tetsu stepped backward. "Dagger and I fight...but never would I kill family."

Truth shot a blazing hand out to point at Tetsu in blame.

"\_And had that Guard not appeared, where would Dagger be now?!",  
\_Truth screamed in a voice barbed with frustration.

"I don't know, but certainly not with us, Tetsu," Truth said, his voice steaming still.

Tetsu stepped back, shame forcing its way upward through a thick broth of thoughts.

Truth had calmed down quickly, inwardly despising his escaped anger.

Tetsu stood physically unflinching, groping mentally for strength. He stood with no words forming, waiting for his punishment. No, test.

The Prophet nodded, noting that it seemed Tetsu was finally beginning to learn his place.

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## Chapter 7

Another day, another casualty.

Samuel Lennon, another naive crewman had been on an expedition with John during what felt like afternoon. The two had gone miles from the landing site and were going around a corner now.

John stopped, thinking he saw a black glimmer.

"What's up, sir?" asked an almost excited Samuel.

John stepped backward. "I think I felt something."

Not thinking of John's choice of words (feeling through \_armor\_), Samuel stepped backward in almost the exact way John had.

John was looking at Samuel while the crewman smiled.

"What are you smiling about?" asked the Spartan with authority.

"I see a city," he said with immature excitement.

John's head spun around, and in an archway that extended from the floor to the black ceiling. Through the archway that was about as wide as John's forearm, lengthwise, was a gigantic city- much like ones on Earth- about 50 feet below them.

John stepped through it and almost \_felt \_(and certainly heard) a gust of chilling wind. Samuel followed him through. The city was in a dome, and the narrow path that was ahead of the archway winded around it and spiraled downward. John guessed that would be the long way down, because the dome was close to the moon's width.

Samuel began laughing, and soon so was John. \_I wonder what we must look like right now, \_John thought. \_'Insane' would be near the top of the list.\_

John stopped laughing slowly, and heard Samuel stop with a sigh. "Man, we're gonna be freakin' rich when we get back," Samuel said with a bit of laughter remaining in his voice.

John nodded, then pulled up his hand left arm to bring up the MULTIMORPH attachment.

Samuel smirked. "You know, I don't think you've used that until now, sir," he said wryly. "And all it does is teleport things, right?"

"Right," John answered. He punched in 0-1-8-7 and a slow light stretched out of the keypad on his left forearm. The light shaped into a box shape, then turned black and John caught it before it fell from being suspended over his arm.

"Camera," John said, holding it up with an unseeable smile.

He held it to the city and snapped a shot. Satisfactory.

Samuel nodded.

"So, should we explore more? Or go ba-"

Before Samuel stopped talking, John felt a sudden pang of a fresh and singing pain within his mind.

Then a black blur flew downward, accompanied by a horrific swoosh, and Samuel was gone.

John spun around and raised his MA43B high-class .45 caliber automatic assault rifle in questioning and frantic movement, eyes, torso and weapon moving in a sprawl of panic. There was only a silence worse than any John had experienced, worse than any in Area X. He cautiously lowered the gun after scanning with trained eyes for any differences. There were none, save the missing crewman.

John was taught to never be afraid. John was also taught, however, to do 100 push-ups at seven years of age. He never could do either.

He turned and almost sprinted out of the exit, then increased speed as he ran down the cold and silent corridor that began tedious construction on a steel paranoia within his skull.

\_The ship,\_ he thought. \_That dinosaur is going to kill them all, and I can't stop it-\_

He froze, his left leg in midair, and he could not move.

Another large window was to his right, showing a heartbreaking snip of Earth.

The world soon began to fade, and he felt as if he was thrown backward, then forward as he opened his eyes to see a perfectly still sea of black ahead of him. He studied them thoroughly and realized

that it was people- or at least, bipedal organisms- with black outfits and long, alligator-like heads.

Stones' sudden and unwelcome voice broke the still silence:  
\_Motherfucking dinosaurs.\_

He wanted to at least yell, but not even his vocal cords could move.

One of these black-clad lizards stepped toward him, taking a position ahead of the rest. This one had its eyes bare, and they were a crimson and frightening color that whirled with both madness and intelligence. He began to speak an inconsistent and mythic language, strange and short and strong articulations. Not human.

"\_Dek lero sokryio kileke, yonek!\_"

The last word, spoken with a flaming and barbed hate, was quite obviously a warning or message. John still could not move, and the desire to do so only skyrocketed as the smooth-talking and smoothly-stanced reptile approached him in a haunting stillness of a walk. The black clad dinosaur stopped two feet short of John's face, making John realize that, not only did it control his movement, but it was almost as tall as he was. \_Naturally.\_ John saw part of the coolness in one eye when it turned its head for a better examination. It gave him a glare that signified an eternal and almost immature hate. It then did something that made John have a powerful urge to gasp.

The monsters behind him, uniformly clad and uniformly still, sank into the floor in what looked to be a synchronized slow-motion drop into a deeply purple and perfectly still pool. Their 'leader', however, stayed, though he took several steps back. "Tell the rest of your friends if you must," it said in a suddenly cryptic and melodramatic tone. "\_Tetsu will take back what is ours!\_" it yelled with dark excitement and genuine enthusiasm.

Then, with no such grandeur as a flash or snap, he silently and sightlessly vanished. He left no smoke or burn marks on the floor. He did, however, leave with John the ability to continue what quickly returned to a sprint for the ship.

About halfway back, he saw a large shadow fly up the wall, and he again felt as though eyes dotted his body. Wise, powerful, intelligent and quite capable eyes. Still, John ran, feeling a massive amount of building shame for being such a coward cloud over himself.

Finally, after what seemed to be quite an eternity, he saw the front of home base, then its entirety that grew with a warm-welcome feeling. There were no discouraging messages burned into the hull today. Or tonight. It was hard to tell when the sky was always black.

He ran to the ship which politely opened for him, with a familiar hiss, revealing a hallway leading inside. A mechanical and tight hallway, but very beautiful to behold. He sprinted for the back of the craft, dodging crewmen who saluted in a quick blur. In a quick blur, to a quick blur. Finally, John reached the barracks for maintenance men and the mercs alike, where he found the four others

on their own bunk beds. Theirs were near the back of the moderately-sized mass-bedroom. Two bunk beds for all four. Quinton lay on the top of one, Stones below that. Stones was engaged in a conversation with Rhonda, who was across from him, while Raven slept above the 'droid, turned from the others on his side, apparently in a deep sleep. The barracks were dark and held a musk that was almost homely.

Immediately, Rhonda looked up and broke their conversation.

"Where is Samuel, sir? Is there a problem?"

John nodded with vigor as if its speed was relevant. "We might have some company soon. I think we need to get the hell out of this place." He spoke in a hurried mess and almost combined two words. Jack and Raven sat up, Raven looking perfectly awake, as if he was the whole time (which, John thought, would not be improbable). Stones seemed to almost light up at the idea of possible excitement. Before he could ask, however, Rhonda beat him to it.

"May I ask your reasoning, sir?"

John stood still as he spat out in almost frustration, "On my way back, we were...ambushed. He's gone. But we'll have our moment of silence laterâ€" right now, I think what \_did\_ ambush us is coming, fast. Call it an intuition or just a stupid hunch, I don't careâ€" but we need to get out. \_Now\_."

Rhonda looked silently at Stones, who stared back. John motioned for them to get to the cockpit, which the bottom two did. Jack jumped off of the top, making a dull \_thump\_ as he landed. He saluted and then caught up with the other two. Raven, however, seemed to fall slower when he jumped.

He did not salute, but gave John an almost betrayed look. A look with eyes that were a vexing and pained brown, ones that you couldn't stare into without the least bit of fear. The eyes of a stray cat; cool, intelligent, and alone.

It seemed a while before Raven broke the stare into John's visor (though John knew Raven couldn't see his eyes, the man looked directly into them) to head to the front of the ship. John stood in the barracks within silent thought. Then he came to the conclusion that over thinking this decision would only lead to its reinstating. He spun around on his left heel and walked with impatient and cowardly speed toward the ship's cockpit.

## Chapter 8

As Raven plopped into his seat, far in the back of the inadequately-spaced cockpit, he stopped and reminisced. As a boy, Raven grew up in a very poor section of Guatemala. Though he grew up with Spanish speakers and knew the language, he had no Hispanic blood in him and was probably the last fully-blooded Native American on Earth. His childhood was like a normal poor child's; early labor. He had worked for a soft drink company in western Guatemala, helping load cargo ships for exporting. He had also broken his ankle once when carrying more than he was able to. He slipped on something, and what was enough to not only spill everything, but send most of his weight (and he was a very muscular 15) onto one particular ankle,

that being his right. He never even went to a hospital.

He received no education, but rather learned from mistakes and from watching others. One of his favorite things were people; their interesting nature and their total repetitiveness. His only friend, Pedro Juan Rosalinda de Valverde, was the only one to call him Raven.

What he had said translated into: "You're quiet. Watchful. Heh, you can't willfully stay in the same place for long. Like a bird. Like a crow or maybe a raven. Raven!"

That was one of the few times Raven had ever laughed.

His mother and father were strict parents. They were of Catholic religion, but never attended church. He was told that most women were whores, and has never since been in love.

He never had a real dream career until, one day, some local boys a few years older than he thought it would be fun to jump that kid who doesn't talk. He was on his way home from 'work' when four boys, all normally-sized and armed (two had brass knuckles, one had a knife, and the fourth had a bat) nearly killed him.

He was on the ground and bleeding badly when the assailants decided that justice was served and began to flee. Raven, however, was only biding time. He stood, wiped the blood from his nose and mouth, and calmly sprinted to the four, who were walking in a rather neat horizontal line.

\_Like a wall\_, he remembered thinking. \_Like a big, cowardly brick wall.\_

So he tackled one and broke both of his arms.

The other tried to kick him; so he grabbed his leg and actually flipped him over.

The one with the bat, to his right, brought it down on his back. Raven fell, but quickly stood up and slammed the boy's head into the wall behind him.

After it was all said and done, two of the boys were dead. One had shattered forearms, and the last ran. Raven never was jumped again.

For a reason Raven could not retrieve, he suddenly recalled a dream in which there was a large, spherical object in outer space that he knew was bad. Just something you \_know\_, those facts that you know in dreams even if there's no supporting evidence of it within the dream itself. It spun in erratic and shifting circles, and Raven also knew that it was near Earth. It was white and almost mocking, and it stopped and on the back were letters that read, in an unusual clarity, 'HFW'.

There was a sudden thud that broke Raven's reverie, then the rising hiss and shriek of engines. Raven heard the door hiss open and close. John stepped through.

Raven looked at him with an unconsciously high amount of distrust as

he breezed past the others and into the front. He could never respect a man full of cowardice and fear like John was. Raven did, however, respect his ability to hide it.

John took his seat and flipped many switches. "Strap in," he ordered with a shaky voice. "We need to abort this mission now."

Raven wondered why they hadn't aborted after the first death, but swatted the thought away.

There was a rock as the boosters below them activated. Raven saw the walls begin to lower through the sides of the 'windshield'. The ship slowly turned left and was facing the hole that was entered through, which immediately shut with a commanding slam.

Raven probably would have gasped or jumped (or both, as John did), but almost expected it.

Stones' rough voice broke a short, stunned quiet. "I guess you bring 'er back down, Spartan," he said with a hint of distant shock.

Turning to the right so it would face its original direction, the ship began its slow and stupefied descent to that unforgiving metal that things may have walked upon centuries ago. Or, as John would say, are still walking on.

After a stable landing, a burst of static pierced all ears, then changing into words.

"Captain? Sir, what happened? Did we just try to abort?"

John did not answer, and in reality, never would.

Rhonda responded for him: "Tried to, but there was a bit of an obstacle. We're staying," she said with finality, and there was a timid "Yes, ma'am," from the same crewman.

I have to watch what I do around them...especially her...

John pawed at the next thought for a few hours afterward: I can't let her think she's leader.

That 'night', in his sleep, John dreamt of their ship suddenly combusting, and later exploding into hundreds of flaming shards, with him surviving it without so much as a mark on his armor (which he slept in that night). He awoke afterward, dismissed it as a 'subconscious' withdrawal from something he'd seen before, and drifted away once again.

His second dream, though he'd never remember it, was identical to the latter in all properties except his survival.

After a measly breakfast composed of mostly eggs, John decided he'd do some solo exploring (half of him wanted to study more, and the other half which he would not admittedly acknowledge wanted to serve as bait to draw them in again).

By now, I'm probably...what...two, three miles from the ship, he thought absently as he scanned the walls for anything interesting.



There were all sorts of markings, pictures and runes carved into (or, as it seemed at some points, printed on to) the metal walls, but nothing more than what seemed like textual PSA's. He'd examined the walls for a few yards, then noticed that they began to repeat in a pattern that bored him. So, instead of sketching what he saw, he decided to merrily stride down a dimly lit lane that was probably 600 meters wide.

After a few more minutes John thought: \_What we saw out there was a helluva lot bigger than this. I guess it's layered, which would mean an elevator or some dev-\_

Then he saw a small indentation in the wall to his right, probably the size of a normal walk-in closet, with a three-foot-tall-one-foot-in-diameter black metal can. He examined it for about thirty seconds, then crouched down and poked it once or twice.

\_Wastebasket? Makeshift pedestal for reptilian doomsayers to stand on in the epicenter of crowds? Maybe a holder for microwavable perishables, \_he thought with a few mental giggles.

Upon slightly closer observation, he noticed a circular button that was shaped like a zit.

He pressed the black zit and it sank with metallic boredom, then rose back out with little enthusiasm. Nothing happened (but, it did push in, at least). Being the dogged Spartan he is, John decided to press it again. And again. And around a half-dozen more times. Nothing.

\_This \_has \_to do something, \_ he though with more than a little frustration.

Then it hissed at him.

Green light flooded from zigzagged lines along the can that resembled N's. John flinched and backed away quickly, scurrying on his back with his legs and arms.

The hissing grew annoyingly louder, the light brighter. When medieval swordsmiths cooled their metal creations using cold water, steam hissed up from quick evaporation. John was reminded of this by the current sound this possessed can was making.

John noticed that, despite its loudness and brightness, it remained entirely stable. One would expect something canned, when disturbed, to shake and explode (When John was four, he used to make every soda can he could explode from the contained and growing pressure of carbonation) or something.

Then, before John could expand on the thought, it stopped. The lights remained, but the piercing sound stopped abruptly. Then, to John's surprise (and fear), the upper parts of the zigzags (NNNNNN) folded outward. It looked like the can was wearing a hat that was shredded, but done so with an exact pattern. Then, like a tiny spiky flying saucer, it floated upward with no assistance, and stopped slowly at about six feet above the bottom of the can (which had begun to fold out into a flower-shape as well). For a second, there was just two floating black shredded hats, then a green light formed between them,

connecting them. This new light was almost serene; a light, friendly green with a white center. It reminded John of two things; one, two saucers sharing a tractor beam; and two, two black flower blossoms with a green lightsaber's blade between them. John was coming up with a third when he stared for a bit; a big I. The light wavered and flowed like a river. John stood up and stepped to it. With such a light, John expected heat, but as he approached it, he felt coolness radiating from it- and, distantly, felt a bit through the armor.

\_Stop looking at it, do something! Step in! Put your hand in it! At least take a picture! This could mean some good money! This could mean going back home! YOU COULD SEE THE BLUE SKY-\_ John shut his loud thoughts off, but didn't ignore their message. He stepped to it, and all at once, stepped through.

Almost upon contact, he felt a horrible sense of nausea during what must have been the 'ride', because when he hit the new floor, he collapsed and narrowly dodged vomiting. He stood and quickly recollected himself, then gaped at what he saw.

He stood in a room that had a ceiling somewhere beyond his own field of vision. The room seemed square at first, and at least around it was a dark purple, and was of a certain architecture that reminded him of the Covenant's. He shuddered.

Covering the walls were many large pictures of various things John would study in a bit. First, though, he had to explore the room under his feet physically. He was overjoyed to be in a room that didn't seem so...well, dead. There were sliding doors shaped like U's in the middle of the four sides (the one behind him was also behind the teleporter; and to its left). The room itself was almost a cone with a square base and...

\_A big-ass space between the floor and the ceiling.\_

John felt a certain energy he judged as excitement. He then remembered hearing that some people are sensitive to ghosts' presence, and sometimes also feel an unexplainable energy. Especially when there in rooms where either a lot of people have died or were once before they died.

John wondered which one of those his current situation would classify as.

\_I've got four routes I could take right now. They could lead to my death or they could lead to my going home. \_John heard Quinton: \_Which way ya goin', Johnnyboy?\_

John frowned. \_I hate it when he says that.\_

John then observed three other identical black cans by each door.

\_How long have these been inactive? Since dinosaurs? What the hell...so many questions...\_

The Spartan decided to take the door behind the active teleporter. It was, like the others, split

vertically, and therefore, both sides gracefully slid to the floor when he got into close enough proximity. \_No need for those big black pads; now doors have been installed with manners! \_John

found the idea of a manner-chip hilarious. And needed on Earth. \_We can send weaponry and tools from a warehouse hundreds of thousands of miles away, but we haven't mastered doors,\_ he continued with a bit of a chuckle escaping him. Finally, he noticed that the door exited to the gigantic spiral ramp that led into that big city with the weird and big buildings and...

\_Big lights, \_John added, a cold fear mixed with sudden realization running up from his gut to his everywhere else. \_Lights can mean life.\_ He then remembered, \_this is my second time that my amusement has been interrupted by this city.\_

Because of this observation, Johnnyboy decided to call the city "Killjoy".

He returned to the ship promptly to share all the discoveries, from which Rhonda was especially excited. "Their teleporters are far different from what our science fiction authors had always thought; instead of molecularly disassembling the teleportee, it just gives them a really bad tummy ache," he added after his story. Rhonda was captivated. "Sir, I propose you take me with you. I may be able to analyze this can of yours without activating it, and we could bring it back to the \_Feather\_ for even further examination!" She sounded like a scientist who had just found that the secret to time travel was a few drops of WD-40 and some duct tape. John looked at the rest of the crew, who nodded and looked at each other in silent approval. John said: "Alright. It's a couple miles down the hall from here; it should be active and we can go through it."

Rhonda 'smiled'. "Great," she said with humanoid enthusiasm. "Shall we

try again?" Truth asked, completely aware of Tetsu's agony. The Trihorn lie down in pain as he felt his calloused flesh tingle. His ankles were black from the sparks of Arkaahn's Walk, the afformentioned line of flaming coals.

"Come now, 'Su- you made it almost 16 feet," Truth said monotonously. Tetsu slowly began to rise again, groaning as he did.

Four years had passed since the beginning of his training- known among Hierarchs as The Nine Trials. He had passed Shierken's Battle, Ryka's Discipline (which technically only ended after the training itself was completed), and the reenactment of The First War.

Their race values their history like one of current times values a cell phone. The Nine Trials were normally annual tests, but Truth prolonged them because he knew Tetsu was the most physically adept Lord they could ever have.

Shierken was the first Prophet of Mercy, back when a Prophet was not a leader but a translator of the Wall. The Wall of Prophecy, located in Pangaea's epicenter (which they called Home). Shierken was normally the one who spoke of the woes and horrible things to come to their race, and was never truly liked by the people of the surrounding forest. Before the introduction of the Trihorns to the

forest, they rebelled against the entire Prophet system, which had still only been around for five years. The people felt that they should see the Wall on their own and make their own determinations. The current Prophets of Truth and Regret were killed with ease by the savages, Truth captured and, outnumbered and not in any condition to fight, Shierken used his wit and few remaining loyal companions to win the battle, the rebellion ending in the rebels' surrender.

Ryka was simply that Prophet of Truth, who was captured, tortured and killed. He was weak and undignified; the exact opposite of the current Truth. Randomly-timed whippings with a laser-esque whip were to symbolize the destruction of weakness through pain, and Tetsu hardly noticed them anymore.

After the chaos ended, Shierken ruled the people of the forest for around a decade. Aging, he proposed that the people migrate from the forest and spread out over what he called a magical land (he had gone astray for a few hours and saw his first fish that same day). Before they did, however, a different people- ones with three horns; two diagonally pointing outward on the back of their heads and one on their snouts- had beat them in the migration game. During preparation and pep talks, the Trihorns came in from a direction the race would later call North, or at least the equivalent to it in their language.

When the crowd slowly and shyly stepped into the clearing which contained the Wall, Shierken and his few recently-named Honor Guards confronted them. One special Honor Guard forced his way to the front, then stood, breathing in the face of a male Trihorn. "Krshen kraaken ank kryy," it said to him, and it sounded like rocks grinding on other rocks. The thing that was recorded in history, the moment that the entire race knows about was what happened next. For a reason not even he knew, he had a powerful and acidic hatred for this new people suddenly spawn in his entire body (you know, they say most humans fear difference. These, however, were not human).

The Honor Guard broke his Code by striking him as hard as he could in the throat, almost instantly killing the innocent Trihorn. This Honor Guard later found it to be a mistake that cost his entire race.

This caused an absolutely monumental battle containing thousands of two different people fighting. Shierken himself did not wish to (though the other Guards seemed perfectly willing) fight, so he actually scaled the mile-long, three-meter-tall Wall, scratching off some rather unimportant things, and yelled at them all to stop. "Look at yourselves!" the former Prophet screamed, though nothing listened. "Animals! We cannot fight like this! Make peace!" His screams fell upon ears most deaf.

Then a sudden call from a powerful voice came, and from the shade of the thick forestry walked a Trihorn who was probably the most famous of them all (and a role model to most remaining Trihorns on Advancement), Lord Arken. The teeming mass of Trihorns quickly darted in complete reverse, and none of the others gave chase. Instead, the watched in curiosity as both leaders approached each other and then attempted at conversation.

"Please, my people and I apologize for that Guard's rude actions. Perhaps we can-

The eyes of this other king met his, and the stare silenced Shierken. They were cold yet hot; serious yet hot-headed and certainly intelligent. "Krren nic kii shkne kett," he said, as if it were something that should obviously be understood. He then turned and left, leaving Shierken with only the glazed image of those entirely and fiercely blue eyes. As he left, Shierken noticed he had a stone tool attached by a tight rope around his waist. A few feet long with twin prongs and what looked like a half-circular base with a handle connecting the prongs. Anyone on the \_Feather\_ would instantly recognize it as what it was- a primitive Covenant energy sword.

Tetsu began to lean forward and crouch, ready to sprint once again across this flaming strip.

"Ready?" Truth asked, staring down the long strip. Tetsu did not answer.

"Go," Truth whispered, and Tetsu did.

The future Lord ran and ran along the strip, sparks and embers escaping from his feet with every step. Tetsu felt his own flesh cook further. He looked ahead to no end, but was reminded by a distant Truth that he could leap to the side at any time, relieving his feet. Truth told him that something special was at the end, something that would unlock the rest of the Trials.

After a few more minutes of running, Tetsu pushing himself as hard as he could, he thought he saw that the sides began to close in. He then knew that he saw a structure, cutting off the sides; a hallway, a cavern of metal. He kept going, trying now to reach it. A few more steps...

Tetsu tripped. His body quickly flew down and smacked the coals.

He screamed in agony as he felt the front of his torso singe and burn, then scrambled up and over the line that separate the walk from this cavern, with an unusually cold and, as usual, metal floor. He fell onto it and gagged as he heard his flesh sizzle. Felt good, though.

He lie there for almost an hour, then sat up. Hanging his head, he thought, \_Guess I should see what's on the other end.\_

He stood shakily, yelping a few times from the burns. He spun around and saw what looked like some cabinet.

It was purple and split down the middle. It was attached to the cavern's back wall, right in the middle, elevated around a meter. He approached it, wondering if it would expel any Shadows.

He took another step, and it started to open on its own. Inside was, held by two small metal prongs, what looked like a small pipe bent on either side. Tetsu approached it and examined it closely. On the handle's middle was the race symbol, and he now saw that disks were lain vertically at either end. Tetsu was strongly inclined to remove it from this cabinet, and did.

Almost immediately after Tetsu's arm was out of the metal doors' ways, the cabinet slammed closed.

He held this thing in his left hand. He noticed that there was a button replacing the race symbol's dot, and the entire top half of the handle could be pressed in.

\_Squeezed\_

He heard Truth, and squeezed the handle in. He brought his thumb down and held the button at the same time. He then suddenly knew what to do, almost instinctively. So, lifted the handle above his head and brought his arm down with a movement too big to be called a jerk. He stopped his arm when it was parallel to his waist, and he heard miniature thunder and felt a wave of heat as he activated the energy sword made for Lords.

## Chapter 9

He felt it in his hand. He felt it channel its energy and mirrored the effect to the blade. Its heat became a warm feeling that he felt completed him. \_I'm keeping it,\_ he thought with a grin, and leaped diagonally to escape the cavern and land on the metal sides past the walk. He felt his feet sting, but did not make a noise.

He sat down a couple of feet from the walk and admired the blade as he held it away from him. A beautiful half-circle with twin prongs from its top. He gasped suddenly, accidentally inhaling some saliva. While coughing and hacking madly, he remembered his dream, \_his premonition\_

\_premonition\_

\_foresight\_

\_vision\_

\_future?\_

\_past?\_

\_...and then he flew down the mountain with a hundred trihorns behind him the holy mountain the trihorns' mountain and he breached the camp saved the trihorn population arken we worship you\_

Tetsu sat up very quickly, with a yelp. He was panting and sweating. It seemed as though he passed out...which struck him as strange. Stranger yet, the sword was no longer active.

He requested sight but was only answered with utter blackness; the kind that wouldn't give you the ability to see anything that wasn't an inch away from you. He turned and saw that the walk was still there, radiating warmly yet intimidatingly. He had fallen asleep or passed out or something.

\_Come back here. I know you have completed this Trial. I will show you the next.\_

Tetsu automatically knew it was Truth. Not wanting to be whipped twice as hard as normal, he obeyed. It seemed like an eternity before he reached Truth. As he walked he thought of his dream, which was fading away quickly. Something about a premonition. Didn't matter

now.

He casually walked alongside the run, shaking off the powdery remains of sleep. He began to sense Truth's presence ahead of him, growing. Tetsu almost dreaded it, for he knew the punishment would be next.

Finally, he saw in front of him dim movement, which he knew was the Prophet. His stomach churned at the thought of the upcoming pain.

With a violent crack, the same electrified whip from before landed right between what we would have called his shoulder blades. He flew downward and landed on his stomach, knocking the wind out of his young lungs.

Though Tetsu did not precisely panic, he did scramble and crawl away frantically.

"Calm yourself, Lord," Truth said casually, using the light from the turquoise whip to admire the new wound inflicted with perfect aim.

Tetsu stopped and lie there, eyes wide, panting and frantically gasping for air.

"Rise. Your breath will return shortly."

Tetsu quickly became frustrated with his calm, almost satisfied tone as he was struggling to breathe. Slowly he felt his air return to him, and began to stand.

He pushed himself up with his arms and onto his feet, now feeling normal. As he stood and turned to face the Prophet, he saw only a bright green as he was struck again - this time, in the gut.

With a pained grunt, he fell to his knees, hearing the low hum of the Prophet's hoverchair.

Tetsu wanted to say something, but he couldn't for two reasons; because he couldn't disrespect this 'mentor' without bringing on further punishment, and because it hurt too damn bad.

The Lord-in-training fell to the right and held his position, bruising his arm.

Truth brought the whip down again, and it curved around Tetsu's arm and onto his back, leaving a terrible cut and a worse pain.

"What were you doing when you finished the Run? Sleep? No. You are to report back after every Trial."

Tetsu felt the sting of tears hit his eyes, and blinked them away. Another stinging smack from the whip hit his neck, and Tetsu remained quiet.

"This is for your own good," Truth said quietly. "Consider it conditioning."

Tetsu grimaced. \_Conditioning...or sadistic torture of a psychopathic

Prophet?\_

Truth frowned, stopping his hand right before it struck him again. Of course, his frown was not seen.

"Such a shame, Lord. I thought you would at least be smart enough to hide your thoughts from me." He brought the whip up again and finished this round of torture with a \_coup de grace \_to the head, leaving a small cut and singed flesh. Truth only finished because it knocked Tetsu unconscious.

Tetsu awoke again, this time braced for another whipping, but noticed that he was alone in the absolute darkness.

For a reason the Lord never even distinguished until the near-completion of his training, his heart suddenly began to race. He felt himself heat up with a sudden and uncontrollable burst of adrenaline that he truly could have done without.

He knew this feeling, and knew it was a bad thing to be feeling. It was fear.

Another test, of course. And soon afterward, Tetsu would somehow end up unconscious. Typical.

However, Tetsu still knew not why his instincts told him of something to fear.

So, though it at least squelched this question, the floor collapsed under him. It was a sudden and booming crumbling, and suddenly he was falling into a deep and dead canyon. He screamed as he saw that he was easily going to die, were he to hit the ground. There was, however, a river.

He was forced by a current to flip over, with his abdomen now facing the blue sky. Above him, however, were dozens of fellow Trihorns, all diving heads-down. Not too far behind them was a cliff.

\_Alright, so either these are either after me or with me. And...what, are we committing mass suicide?\_

He forced himself back around and formed the kind of aerodynamic 'dive-bomb' that the rest formed. He felt like these were allies.

It was only a second before his head and the deep, cool and calm river met.

Tetsu opened his eyes once underwater and quickly found the water's surface. He scrambled upward toward the light. Upon breaking the surface, he coughed once and quickly caught his breath. Tetsu quickly scanned the surroundings as he heard several splashes from behind him. First, he spotted a small village along the left bank of this river. Second, he spotted alarmed Nohorns pointing and running in his...\_their \_direction. Finally, after looking over his shoulder, he saw his companions burst through the surface of the water. One looked at him and asked, "What next, sir?"

\_Damn\_, thought the future Lord spitefully. \_Truth must have put me here to test leadership capabilities. No big deal.\_ He would reflect on this unspoken sentence later to grin at the irony of an imaginary



leadership test involving what would soon be real combat as 'no big deal'.

Tetsu felt rising pride as he spoke, "First, I want three of you to take out the three guards rushing at us," he said, splaying his fingers to indicate a triplicate of armed guards wielding primitive earthen spears. Tetsu quickly counted his private militia. There were nine of them, ironically. So, with him, there was a total of 10 Trihorns against a village of barbaric and ignorant Nohorns. \_Good odds.\_

He turned and used a quick hand gesture to send the rest to back up the first three. "Three per guard," Tetsu yelled. In response, the Trihorns began immediately to swim forward, right at his command.

The second-to-last soldier looked to Tetsu and smiled. "They'll regret our persecution, Lord Arken!"

Tetsu's eyes widened as the soldier swam off. \_So...I play the roll of Arken...\_

Tetsu turned around again and swam at his maximum speed to the shore. He noticed a stone blade attached to his side and removed it from its hitch. All he was wearing was a belt, like his other soldiers. \_Modesty must not have existed back then,\_ Tetsu thought with desperate humor. He planted his feet into the shore, then sprinted onto the bank. His soldiers had already taken the guards out and were demolishing most of the earthen homes. While running toward the largest building in sight (his intuition told him that the chief would be in there), he turned and shouted, "Do not kill civilians! Capture them only when it is necessary!"

Should this war end, and Tetsu still played as Arken himself, he would have the innocent villagers released. But that would come later.

Sprinting through screaming civilians and making sure not to trip, Tetsu held the primitive forerunner of his energy sword as he would the real thing. The capital building's stairs were now under his feet. He looked up to notice the ancient Valor Guards, primitive Honor Guards. They spotted Tetsu- or, Arken, and made to form a barricade. Of course, Tetsu had no problem clearing through them. Using his blade, he forced the blade into the left guard's eyes, killing him nearly almost instantly. Using his instinctive knowledge of centrifugal force, he threw himself upward using the blade's handle to ride the guard as he fell backward. Before the second guard could even turn, Tetsu had removed the blade and made it into the building. He sprinted through an empty hall and saw a wide-eyed monarch in the distance, sitting on his throne. The king, count or whatever was completely alone. \_No escape route? Not even any personal bodyguards? Pathetic.\_

Before the king had the chance to stand and flee, Tetsu had him pinned to his own throne. Terrified, the king struggled and yelled for his guards. None came, as he saw his nine allies flood through the same opening. They had killed the second guard with ease.

The flailing monarch screamed in a language unknown. Yet Tetsu knew what to say.

"Ikken rei'i na kreseh!"

Tetsu glared, then automatically said "Dokh di'il mos't stib'r."

"Ei'n! Ei'n na kreseh!"

"\_Noru!", yelled Tetsu. The king stopped struggling suddenly. \_I guess whatever I said worked.\_

"Yu..y'te na kreseh, ke? Yu na tik me'l do'r nik?"

"Noru," he repeated calmly. \_Noru must mean 'no'.\_

"..Then you win," said the monarch with an atrocious accent. "So long as my people are safe and I live."

"So, you speak Trihorn?"

"Small. Not much."

"Then teach the rest of your people, for this city..." Tetsu turned to face his nine friends. "...\_is ours!\_"

The hall was filled with prideful cheers quickly. Tetsu grinned warmly. He almost forgot this was not real.

Suddenly he felt the ground ripped from under him as he was brought upward by a blue, circular beam of light. A friendly light, which he now realized traveled endlessly upward into the bright blue sky.

Tetsu looked downward with curiosity. Nothing moved. Time was stopped.

He looked upward and saw he was now out of Home's atmosphere and rapidly headed toward Advancement. Soon, he would awaken, dazed and scarred.

To his surprise, he continued upward, then went straight through the moon-sized innovation, whizzing past casual civilians who saw nothing.

Finally, he reached an upper level and the light vanished, and he gently fell upon the ground.

He saw a silhouette of a bent figure with ornate and grand decorations on the chair it hovered on. He knew it was Truth.

"Amazing, Tetsu. You have proven your abilities as a leader."

Tetsu tried not to let the Prophet's unusual (and quite genuine) state of impression to go to his head. He knew it was likely never to happen again. \_So I'll make it happen.\_

Truth slithered from the shadows, his claws folded together in absolute approval.

"Placed in a situation where you knew nothing, and yet you were perfectly able to deduct, conclude and execute with an excellent show of strength and battle-ready wisdom."

Tetsu tried not to grin and looked downward. He swelled with pride.

"Indeed, I was impressed. For this you are granted...a day off."

Tetsu immediately met eyes with the Prophet (which were the only exposed parts, anyway).

"Pardon?"

"You have been training daily for well over three years," Truth explained. "I think you deserve it."

Tetsu squinted in suspicion. "Though I don't mean to question your, Excellency, why is it that you decide to be nice now?"

Truth curled his snout, unbeknownst to Tetsu. "Please, I have things to discuss with my fellow Prophets. I leave you to peruse in the dark. Meals will be placed back by the Path...when you need them."

And with that abstract statement, Truth backed into darkness and seemed to disappear.

\_Such is the Prophet's decree\_, Tetsu thought loyally, and a tear almost formed after he realized that the thought alone forfeited his old self. He knew soon the fiery, rash Tetsu would soon be replaced by a cold, logical Lord. It saddened him to no end to see it happening. Worse, he knew he could do absolutely nothing to stop it.

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## Chapter 10

John had decided to take Rhonda and Stones with him, who followed behind. The Spartan noticed Stones was consistently looking over his shoulder, almost expectantly. As they walked along the dark corridors (lit dimly by an unknown source), John turned and commanded, "Stones. Stop worrying, it'll throw us off."

Stones glanced up. "Oh, sorry, sir."

"Just keep it together. The teleporter's just up ahead."

The trio eventually reached the small canister and hefted it back to the \_White Feather\_ and brought it into the bridge, using a table rolled in from elsewhere to examine it better.

Rhonda studied it intensely, as did Raven and John. Stones stood and watched out of the cockpit while Quinton slept peacefully.

"It looks like a strange mixture of metals...all billions of years old."

Stones peered back, curious.

"Billions?" Quinton interjected. "Must mean this place has been here even longer."

Rhonda blinked, though she didn't have to. "It's blended extremely well. I'd say it was melted at well over 300 degrees Celsius, mixed in, then almost...woven," she said, sounding almost human with the bit of wonder escaping her. "I don't know how they could have mixed them so well at such a high temperature."

"Well," Raven stated firmly, most of the crew wide-eyed to hear the scarred warrior speak at all, "think about it. If they were able to construct a moon-sized station, give it its own orbit and keep it hidden from humans for thousands of years...I'd say they can do almost anything."

No one could very well argue. He did make a good point.

John looked at his right wrist wearily, eyes blurry from shredded remains of sleep. It read: 0121 HOURS; SEPTEMBER 5 2636. John yawned. He had achieved a perfect five hours of undisturbed sleep, and the barracks were silent.

The Spartan shifted out of bed and quickly into his armor. He had long since learned to run on few hours of sleep, and he was already operational and ready for another trip into the abyss. He sighed as the temperature-regulating gel within the MJOLNIR armor warmed his pale skin, and left the barracks in a good mood.

The cockpit was occupied only by Raven, the rest probably asleep. Surprised he hadn't notice them, the Spartan sat in the pilot seat and stared dreamily into the dark, metal nothingness that was their temporary home.

Raven saluted him as he sat in the copilot seat, and John returned it. "Have a restful sleep, sir?" asked the ex-soldier.

"Best sleep I've had in weeks," John said with a smile. This was indeed quite an accurate statement, as the past weeks here had not been entirely restful. Ever since the unknown assailant took one of the faithful crewmen and etched neo-graffiti into government property, nobody had slept easily. But things were calming down, and so far nobody else was dead.

The two sat in silence for a good five minutes or so when Raven stood. "I'm going to get some breakfast in the commons. Are you going to stay here?"

John nodded. "Of course. We need to keep watch."

Raven nodded in response to John's. "Right."

The heat-sensing slide door opened courteously for Raven and shut, leaving a resounding quiet.

It was cold. Very cold. John could feel it even through his thick armor, though his energy shielding was off. Though he himself would prefer having them on constantly, he was warned pre-launch not to use it while on the ship. The present engineer had warned him of the

possibilities of the pulsing energy interfering with the ship's hardware, and it was better not to chance it.

After a bit of thinking, John, too, decided nourishment was in order. He turned on his heel and exited the cockpit, heading through the dimly lit and cramped corridors of the Feather in search of the commons, that being the ship's basic lunchroom.

Rhonda's eyes automatically opened, ending her sleep cycle for the night. She threw herself out of bed with superhuman efficiency and was clothed and ready for another boring day here in paradise - all within fifteen minutes. A personal best.

She coolly (and, she thought, human-ly) strode through the tight halls and toward the commons for some sustenance.

Granted, she could function perfectly fine without any, but her constant and nagging need to feel as human as possible forced her to eat like a normal woman would.

The door slid open to reveal Raven, clad only in the same bright orange nylon pants, sitting across a small table from a Spartan with white, custom-made MJOLNIR perfection.

She saluted to the Spartan, grinning. "Good morning, sir," she added.

The Spartan returned her salute. "Good morning."

Raven waved at her, and Rhonda did the same.

She walked toward a refrigerator, one of the many onboard. She opened it casually, relishing in the fact that she felt the cool air hit her face.

She bent over and reached in to grab an apple from a drawer, closed the door and stood by the cooler as she bit into the fruit. It was cold, but refreshing. She threw the core into a disposal, which ground it up and sent the remains to an unknown destination.

She noticed that Raven and the Spartan had no conversation. Awkward.

Rhonda faced the door she entered and waved to the men without looking at them.

"I'll be in the cockpit."

Raven and John said nothing as they remained at the table. "I suppose I'll go and ready up for today's expedition," said the Spartan with finality. He stood.

"Alone?" Raven asked, still staring at the metal table before him, hunched over.

John frowned. He had been debating whether to go solo or not while munching breakfast down, but he didn't want another life taken. He knew nothing of what this structure held, and even less about its inhabitants. The shadowy, foreboding architecture to which its creators stylized this place provided more than enough hiding spots

for potential surprises, of which John wanted nobody else to experience. Not for glory, but simply because of his constant, subconscious need to protect and serve. He was a Spartan, and it would indeed be expected of him to prefer teamwork over individuality, but if the lives of his comrades were in question, John could only draw one answer that seemed feasible - to leave them somewhere safe. John knew very well he was the most combat-capable out of the mercenaries, and was certain he was the one with the most training.

Some of the remaining colonies had rebellions quite frequently, and he was dispatched to quell fighting numerous times.

The horrific image of a screaming civilian, flaming and in an unprecedented amount of pain and panic, flashed into his mind and made him grimace. The smell of rotting flesh and burnt rubber reminded him of that scene. He was part of Green Team, and was sent to stop the killing spree of a dozen or so mad-bombing, well-armed rebels on a planet whose name John couldn't remember. John remembered distant gunfire and a sense of dread as his squad leader commanded him to get out of the open. He recalled a horrendous explosion from their rear flank, and saw a tower collapse a distance away. He heard the same man bark to get behind another building, and suddenly the area behind them was filled with a towering cloud of dust and debris. It rushed at the four of the Spartans with increasing speed, and John quickly sought cover behind a sturdy building, as did his fellow squad mates.

He felt the intense heat rush by him as the cloud flew past. Much of it leaked into his alley and his friends', but not enough to even damage his shields.

John then recalled the dread as the other three blips on his HUD, representing his squad mates, suddenly disappeared.

Somehow, his friends had all died from the cloud, and he survived unscathed.

John never forgot that day. You never forget your first deployment...especially when you go from the squad's lowest rank to your own leader.

The Spartan shook the images away, and quickly left the Feather. He was glad to; he was already getting quite sick of gray metal. Although, dull, purple metal wasn't too enlightening, either.

He headed for a destination unknown. He knew that lovely gadget on his wrist would give him any food he needed. Something in his mind tugged at him to tell the others, or they may worry, but he countered it. Raven knew he was going. He would tell the others if it came to it.

John gave a heavy sigh and continued on. He still knew not what he would find this time, but the same thing that warned him about his leave also warned him about the journey.

Something was going to happen. And, somehow, the Spartan felt as though it was his duty to let it.

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## Chapter 11

Truth hovered into the meeting room slickly, not reacting as he saw Regret and Mercy do the traditional gestures. "Fellow Prophets, today is the third anniversary of Tetsu's first day of training. I shall convey the summary."

During the Lords' training, it was a custom to summarize every three years of it, making three total reports, and a thorough monitor of the trainee's progress.

"So, Truth. Tell us. We are incomprehensibly curious about this prophetic Lord of yours. How many...how many of the Wall's has he filled?" asked a verbose Regret.

"Oh, quite many."

The reference was to the classic Wall of Prophecy, a huge wall in Home's Forest of Life, in which their race flourished. Inscribed with a primitive and scrawled language that the Prophets of old could never decode it, and instead went by its image. The wall itself was of a stone that was not from Home, and did not erode nor weather. It was monumental in size - exactly 20.44 meters tall and 33.6 meters wide. It had not been touched by anyone other than the Prophets, the only ones considered divine enough to touch or examine the wall.

Their design for many things - their weaponry, their military, their architecture - was based heavily on the images set in this stone. Nobody ever questioned the Prophets, and nobody ever translated the Wall. The first Prophet proclaimed it was created with their planet as a sort of map to their race's future - many bloody battles, thousands of amazing inventions, and the concept of spreading their race throughout galaxies of untold size. The very same Prophet also developed the race's only religion, an unnamed belief that the Creators had left them this sacred wall, and they were only to lead good lives and follow the Wall's Path. Though it could be classified as polytheistic (the Creators), they forbid themselves from naming their divine makers or assigning them images. Their wills and motives for the race's future were unknown.

Truth looked Mercy in the eye. Mercy greatly respected Truth, though he would never say it. Regret, however, arguably the Prophets' highest reasoning, was not as admiring.

Truth continued, "He is a Trihorn. His reflexes are beyond normal. His reasoning is exceptional for his age. Tetsu is the answer to this prophecy, brothers."

Mercy looked interested, Regret curious. "I see. Has he discovered the blade?"

Truth smirked. "More than that. He almost instinctively knew how to wield it, but needed to know how to activate it."

Mercy nodded. "Has he used it in combat yet?"

Truth folded his hands. "Once. A bit ago, I tested him with more Shadows...in utter darkness, their home field. It was a massacre,

brothers. Tetsu used the blade as its own torchlight, and though it provided little illumination, he knew exactly where and when to strike."

Regret's eyes seemed to widen. "Impressive. Our history could account for only one warrior with such a talent in combat," he said, knowing very well the other Prophets knew who he referenced.

Mercy hunched forward. "Only a third through the training, and he would likely be able to kill an Honor Guard," Mercy said wondrously, eyes fixed on the smooth floor.

"Oh," Truth said with the slyness of a fox, "he can."

The meeting continued for another hour or so until all of Tetsu's remarkable abilities were told.

Truth floated into the dark chambers where he saw Tetsu, sleeping in the same spot he stood earlier.

Truth honestly wanted to awaken him, to give him more training. He especially wanted to pit him against an Honor Guard...or four. But for now, he promised the boy he would have a day off. And a day off, he had.

Tetsu awoke in the abysmal darkness, not hearing the sickeningly comforting sound of the antigravity gizmo that kept the Prophet's chair afloat.

He stood wearily, all muscles and bones aching.

Something was different. Something was...\_wrong\_. What?

Then it hit him. The room...though it was still dark, he could see better. It was lighter.

\_All this time in the dark is getting to you\_, said his brain with concern. \_Too bad there's no way out. \_Suddenly he heard a clank. Metal on metal. It had to be a weapon.

Tetsu slowly approached the direction he toward the sound, and was suddenly tackled to the ground by something heavy.

He struggled under its superhuman strength to no avail. It turned him over, and he saw his assailant, who made no noise.

It was an Honor Guard.

It finally spoke after Tetsu stopped moving.

"Runt," it said gruffly. He was already reminded of Dagger.

It continued. "The Prophets have promised me a fat promotion to Second-In-Command of Honor Guards," he informed Tetsu with a voice raspy enough to show his age.

"Let me go, fool," Tetsu commanded, trying to sound level-headed. The Guard grunted.

Tetsu felt a quick and horrendous burst of pain dart up his arm as



the Guard twisted it, snapping his right forearm.

The Guard laughed a merciless, almost satisfied laugh.

He did not see Tetsu's eyes begin to grow red.

Tetsu felt something boil inside. Something he had experienced before... \_when?\_

And, with a primal fit of fury, Tetsu used the grip the Guard had on his left arm to wrench himself free. Using the same arm, he clawed the Guard in the eyes.

As the monster fell back in agony, Tetsu stood, not quite satisfied yet. Tetsu disconnected himself from the pain in his arm and withdrew his blade.

He activated it, and the mini-thunder echoed through the darkness.

The semi-blinded Honor Guard rolled on the floor in pain and confusion, blood seeping through the cracks between his fingers.

Tetsu approached him and quickly beheaded the male, taking a sick joy in seeing his head and neck separate. There was no blood - the blade was too hot for that - but there was smoke. It released a horrid stench that, at that moment, Tetsu did not mind.

End  
file.